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# Shooting Niagara: Making Portfolio Assessment Serve Instruction at a State University

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Can portfolios possibly work for competency assessment at a large, public university? It is hard enough working with just one student and one portfolio: all that minding and reminding, reading for revision, reading for re-vision, checking and double-checking, gathering in, evaluating out. Multiply that by 25 and you have the difficulty of managing portfolios with a whole class. Multiply that by the number of classes in a multi-section course, and you begin to see the problems Elbow and Belanoff talk about. Multiply that by the number of courses involved in a four-year curriculum, and you begin to see the mind-boggling challenges Alverno College (a small, private institution) has been struggling with for years in its general-education portfolio assessment. Multiply the complexity of that program by the greater size of, say, the University of Minnesota, and you are likely to end up with a portfolio system so formidable that it never gets past the proposal stage (Anson and Brown). Just thinking about creating an institution-wide portfolio assessment for a state university leaves you, as William Condon and Liz Hamp-Lyons say it left them at the University of Michigan, "poised on the edge of an abyss."

This is where we are at Washington State University. Last year officially began the testing of the writing competence of all undergraduates, about 14,500 of them, by portfolio. The three of us and Robin Magnuson, Director of the Writing Center, have designed and implemented this new system and are, consequently, responsible for its possible bust. For us, "poised on the edge of an abyss" seems a pretty tame image. We think our present position more like shooting Niagara, which adds, to the picture of hitting bottom, the thought of being ground on the rocks below by several thousand tons of water per minute.

Three years ago at WSU there was no thought about portfolios as part of the revision of the undergraduate general education program. Today, our portfolio system is in place, or rather, on its way (writing assessment, like curricular reform, is never still). During the last three years, we have learned some things, found some answers to the questions that arise with large-scale portfolio assessment. Obviously, they are answers to our local problems, but they may help others contemplating the ride. In shooting our Niagara, we don't know exactly where we are—within sight of the steam rising from the abyss, at the lip, in mid-air? We are inside the barrel and can't see very well. Our account takes us only to the precarious position we find ourselves in now; not yet safely to the

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bottom, we want to talk instead about *building our barrel*—the junior-level portfolio and how we went about constructing it—*launching the barrel*—how we navigated the project around treacherous committee and administrative snags—and finally, *guiding the barrel over the falls*—how we plan to deal with the logistical problems, including adjustments that we may be able to make as we go along, even in mid-air.

But, as with most daredevil stunts these days, first we had to *secure permission*. Three years ago, two of us were appointed to a subcommittee on testing and assessment, reporting to the university-wide committee on writing. We had been asked to develop an alternative to the earlier proposed impromptu examination, which we had torpedoed through a series of letters and interviews with high-ranking administrators. The creation of the subcommittee was our chance to persuade the main committee of the feasibility of portfolio assessment.

Because no other school of our size had made it past the planning stage, good arguments were difficult to come by. Lacking viable models, we used current research to claim that the other assessment alternative—a single impromptu writing test—could not be trusted as the sole indicator of ability (for a summary, see Ruth and Murphy). After identifying the potential failure of the traditional impromptu plan, we were ready with a well-sketched plan of our own—the portfolio (see Appendix A, “WSU Writing Qualifying Examination: Rationale for Using Portfolios,” which became the written version of our arguments). We also made strategic use of deadlines to get our plan accepted. Because the faculty senate had mandated implementation of a junior-level writing assessment within less than a year, the committee needed to begin piloting something in the next semester. Some members of the committee were already supportive of portfolio assessment, but for those who weren’t, the deadline helped get us the nod.

To gain administrative sanction we had to anticipate two problems, both having to do with the labor intensive nature of portfolios: cost effectiveness for administrators and time investment on the part of teachers. We knew our administration would be concerned about the cost of evaluating portfolios. To offset that, we decided to use teacher approval of prior coursework to complete a substantial portion of the portfolio: an original paper with a teacher’s signature on an attached cover sheet would qualify as an already evaluated submission. A completed portfolio would require three such coursework submissions, along with two samples of timed and proctored writing, evaluated by trained readers. Of course, we also anticipated faculty concern that the portfolio would require them to assign more writing or writing of a different kind in their courses. To allay resistance on this point, we kept the number of course submissions low (only three), kept guidelines flexible (no page-length or genre requirements), and included a cover sheet so that teachers could sign off on clean copies of student submissions if they did not wish to have portfolio readers perusing comments written with only the student in mind. We should note that time and again these concerns were raised, and each time we could point to these charted features; ultimately, the fact that we had considered the perspectives of both non-compo-

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sition faculty and budget-wise administrators gained us support at critical junctures of the political process.

## Testing the Waters

Although some of the work designing the portfolio took place while seeking permission to pilot it, much took place beforehand, and we continue to make adjustments as we go along. The portfolio is one part of an integrated program of writing instruction, writing assessment, and general education at WSU. All entering students are placed into an appropriate writing course by essay examination. To pass their required writing course, students submit at the tenth week a folder of writings which, in effect, serves as practice for the junior portfolio. During their freshman and sophomore years, students must complete extended writing assignments in all their general education courses, including research papers in a required two-semester World Civilizations course. By the end of the semester after which they achieve junior standing, students must establish competence on the junior portfolio. They are then qualified to take required writing-intensive upper-division courses in their major. Thus our portfolio is not a one-time assessment, but a midpoint check in an institution-wide emphasis on writing.

In constructing the junior portfolio, every feature was born in a give-and-take struggle between theory and research on the one hand, and local needs and the constraints of a large-scale assessment on the other. We learned that constraints of size often, rightfully, win the day. For starters, take the theoretical issue of validity. How many samples of a student's writing are needed to make a portfolio valid, to show a student's true writing competence? No one really knows, but theoretically, the more, the better. Obviously, with our large student population, the fewer, the better. Here size won out, and we went with as few as we thought we could defend theoretically (three pieces from courses, and two impromptu writings consisting of a traditional essay and a self-reflective piece on the student's writing experience). We noted that portfolio assessment shifts the emphasis from this question of construct validity to the question of instructional validity. Does our test let students show skills and knowledge that have been taught them, or does it unfairly examine them for outcomes that have never come out in their coursework (Feldhusen, et al.)? Here we listened to theory, asking that the majority of portfolio submissions be actual products of the courses themselves, signed off as acceptable by the teachers themselves.

Along with theory, research findings in assessment also battled our size constraints. Given the endless torrent of writers pouring through this competency gate, we knew that we had to have some kind of impromptu writing to convince everybody—faculty and students—that no one would be able to cheat. Recent research has discouraged the use of impromptu timed essays, because that kind of testing tends to undervalue already weak writers (Bernhardt; Morante; and Johns). But coupled with the submission of revised pieces from course work, the impromptu could help us with the first level of competency

assessment—most writers who are able to produce articulate prose under time pressures can *generally* be expected to write well, given time for formal revision. The research also indicates that two separate writing tasks, even if timed, add considerable validity, and that weak writers make good use of extra time to write (beyond a 20-minute minimum) if they have “warmed up” by already writing a piece (Livingston). There also exists a good deal of anecdotal testimony that self-reflective pieces add diagnostic information, but as yet there is little research to confirm it (Allen and Roswell; Faigley, et al.; Camp; and Wolf).

The mixed messages from research gave our size constraints greater voice. We decided to design the main impromptu piece as a repeat of our freshman placement exam, giving students a familiar format and thereby reducing the number of questions they might have about it.<sup>1</sup> The second, self-reflective piece serves primarily as additional information in portfolios difficult to diagnose, much like the “reflective letter” assigned in portfolios for Miami University (Sommers, et al.). Furthermore, by design, the two impromptu pieces double as outcomes assessment pieces for our general education program (also mandated by the state).<sup>2</sup> These multiple uses added credibility to the portfolio as a cost-effective measure and garnered further administrative support for portfolio assessment.

Finally, in designing the portfolio there was some characteristic negotiation between the constraints of size and the local situation. As we have noted, students at WSU prepare a portfolio-like folder in freshman composition. Were we to give in to efficiency totally, we would simply let students submit that folder again at the junior level, or as many pieces from it as they wished. However, as composition teachers trying to give our WAC program further leverage at the lower-division level, we would prefer that none of the junior submissions be from composition classes. Our compromise was to allow one paper from a composition course. For our colleagues across the disciplines, two papers from non-composition courses turned out to be well calculated—at least several key people, including the president of the faculty senate, nodded their heads at the right time and uttered the magic phrase, “looks doable.”

If our decisions appeared calculated, then in this case appearance matched reality. We were aware that the banks of “cutting-edge assessment” were littered with the debris of projects that crossed the jagged line separating “doable” from “disastrous.” Minnesota’s ill-fated junior-level portfolio proposal stipulated four pieces of writing from the freshman year, a long piece from the sophomore, and an extensive research paper from the junior—to our minds perfectly doable, but not so to Minnesota administrators, one of whom helped kill the proposal by calculating that each year’s output of portfolios would take up to 330 feet of shelf space. We encourage others in the planning stage to be mindful of such details: we anticipated the question from our administration and decided to let students be responsible for preparing and storing their portfolios before they were assessed. And yes, questions about filing cabinets were raised more than once.

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## Taking the Plunge

Having gained permission to ply the waters, designed the barrel and, finally launched it, the question is still: can we guide it safely over the falls? Fortunately, our Writing Center, which was delegated headquarters for the portfolio project, has an established reputation for serving, with minimal resources, the writing support needs of dozens of departments. The director, assistant directors and numerous tutors (many from disciplines other than English) spend hours each semester doing volunteer outreach—going to classes across the campus to discuss Writing Center services for both students and teachers. In the last few years, the staff has visited 73 different classes within 37 degree departments as well as providing over 3,000 contact hours of tutorials per semester.

We situated the portfolio *administratively* in the Center rather than, say, our campus Testing Office, because we believed that its service to students and faculty would make it instrumental in establishing a climate conducive to *instructional* implementation of the portfolio. Sustaining that climate, however, depended on incorporating administrative functions which had not been responsibilities of the Center before. Space, equipment, and clerical help existed only minimally for its services; tutors and students handled all registration issues on a single computer. The increased paperwork and student traffic resulting from a portfolio assessment presented challenges for Writing Center staff that could not be adequately met unless the budgetary waters were deepened, not diminished. Because permanent funding was not available at the time of implementation (though requests were in the pipeline), the program relied heavily on a student fee of \$12.00 which was tentatively projected to cover maintenance costs once the program was underway. However, the risk of using a writing center that existed on soft funds proved strategically successful: permanent funding, a long overdue raise for the director, support for summer hours, new equipment, a secretary, and preferential ranking on the university's building list—all came through on the next budget.

Because students are asked to take most of the risks in this journey, and pay for it as well, we launch them into this process by providing them with all the information and support necessary to compile their portfolios. As students complete their freshman writing class, which is the prerequisite for submitting a portfolio, they are given information about the procedure, and reminded that they may already have one of their three required course papers completed. They are also encouraged to visit or call the Writing Center if they need help. Transfer students (who make up fifty percent of WSU's upper-division student body) may submit work from other institutions and are given additional time (the equivalent of one semester at full-time enrollment) to collect the required pieces; because they do not usually take a writing course at our campus, the Writing Center plays an even greater role in advising and helping them to prepare their coursework pieces.

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Throughout the semester, the Writing Center advertises times for students to check-in with their portfolios, and once we determine that they are eligible—that is, that they have three course papers complete with signed cover sheets—students are charged the fee, with the receipt indicating the time and place for the writing session and serving as the “ticket” for admission. We feel this checking-in step is crucial to the success of the portfolio—it allows us to talk with the students and help them take care of any problems before they show up to do the supervised writing component of their portfolio, and it enables us to schedule students in an orderly manner so we are not overwhelmed by too many students at any writing session. We also offer students the option of writing the main impromptu essay on a word processor, so we must know in advance how many students to expect.

Once the portfolios are complete, they are submitted to a multidisciplinary faculty reading committee. Readers are recruited to join if they have established a history of commitment to writing instruction at our institution, usually from earlier attendance at WAC seminars or repeated contact with the Writing Center. To encourage continued interest in the program and to recognize their special service, we pay readers a respectable hourly wage. We divide our pool of readers into two tiers: those new to the process (Tier 2) and those with extensive experience with writing assessment (Tier 3). (Tier 1 is the faculty signing off on course papers.) Tier 2 readers read only the impromptu portions of the portfolio and their task is relatively simple. We begin training Tier-2 readers using facsimiles of previously-assessed pieces until their responses are consistent with those of the more experienced Tier-3 readers. Then they participate in the regular training and rating sessions. Eventually, and as the numbers of portfolios grow, we will promote Tier-3 readers from the Tier-2 group. Having the two levels allows us to slowly build an experienced, well-trained group of faculty from across the disciplines to participate in the more difficult task of portfolio assessment.

Although theory recommends at least two independent readings for valid rating of essays, we decided to challenge theory (and tradition) in order to streamline the reading of portfolios. We begin by separating the process of evaluation into two steps: reading and rating the impromptu pieces and reading and rating portfolios as a whole. After a regular norming session, in which all readers participate, Tier-2 readers read and sort impromptu essays as *acceptably proficient*, *not proficient* (or even questionably proficient), and *exceptional*. Essentially, their task is to identify the middle group of proficiently written essays—all others, strong or weak, are read by Tier-3 readers, often in conjunction with the other submissions in the portfolio. Based on earlier pilot studies, we anticipate a majority of the impromptu essays being “acceptable” and therefore requiring only one reading. All problematic or exceptional impromptu essays are read by the more experienced Tier-3 readers who either verify or nullify the non-proficient or exceptional determination and, if necessary, discuss the essays with other Tier-3 readers until a consensus is reached. Although a borderline essay may receive several readings (the initial Tier-2 reading and one or more Tier-3

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readings), the percentage of essays that need that attention is relatively small. Consequently, essays that most readers agree on receive less attention and essays which are difficult to assess receive considerably more. Our follow-up studies of this process suggest that it is as accurate as the more traditional holistic approach, but more labor efficient.<sup>3</sup> *That difference is the most important reason that an institution of our size can undertake a portfolio assessment.*

After Tier-2 and Tier-3 readers determine whether impromptu essays are "exceptional," "acceptable" or "need work," the process of reviewing the three revised pieces begins. In cases where students have written exceptionally on the impromptu exam and all three of the revised pieces have been designated "exceptional" by classroom teachers, then the portfolio is deemed "exceptional" overall. These require no further reading. In cases where a discrepancy exists between coursework and the impromptu writing (e.g., where the classroom teachers have designated the pieces "exceptional" but the impromptu pieces were deemed "need work"), further reading of the portfolio by Tier-3 readers is required. Again, we have streamlined our process by looking only at problematic portfolios, those in which some differences exist in the ratings of Tier-2 (in the case of revised pieces, classroom teachers) and Tier-3 raters. Of the 3500 or so students whose work we will evaluate each year, we anticipate between ten and twenty percent being reviewed for exceptional merit, and between twenty and thirty percent being reviewed for possibly needing further instruction. In other words, we anticipate fifty percent of our students receiving a "pass" on their portfolio based on a single reading of the two impromptu essays. The remaining fifty percent will receive a second reading of the impromptu essays, and perhaps fifty percent of those will require a review of the full portfolio—either to award merit or to determine need. In real numbers, that means we will read 875 portfolios instead of 3500.

Students whose entire portfolio package demonstrates exceptional writing skill receive acknowledgement on their official transcripts. Using the portfolios to recognize more than minimal competency gained us support from faculty in other disciplines, administrators, even our university regents. Students whose impromptu pieces suggest more instruction is needed are required to complete whatever work has been indicated by the Tier-3 readers, ranging from a few hours in a topical workshop to a 1-credit tutorial course offered by the Writing Center (taken concurrently with upper-division writing-in-the-major courses), to an additional 3-credit lower-division writing course. Other options may become apparent once the program provides us with more information about student needs. Notably, most options are instructional (that is, further coursework or tutorials); the experience of other institutions tells us that using retesting as a regular option would create a pool of students caught between lower and upper-division status. Although retesting is one possibility, especially for cases where students wish to appeal the decision, we believe that the use of portfolios argues against it. Even though the impromptu essay is the first level of assessment, the three revised pieces in the portfolio carry the greatest weight in the assessment outcome, and students whose writing has been designated

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“needs work” have demonstrated consistent problems throughout their portfolio.

Are we assessing something that truly merits the name “portfolio”? We believe so. It is true that a large number of our students will have only their impromptu essays read by the reading committee. However, all of our students will have had all five of their essays assessed at some point, all students whose qualification is questionable will have all five of their pieces judged as a unit, all students will benefit from the process of building portfolios, all students will reflect on their writing process, and all students will be able to choose their best work for the readers to consult, if necessary. In another way, our assessment process has already achieved an outcome traditionally awarded to portfolio systems: it has had an impact on classroom instruction and institutional awareness of assessment issues that a simple impromptu examination would never have had. Our barrel may look strange compared to those used by other, smaller institutions and to writing folders used by teachers in the classroom; nevertheless it meets our particular needs and resources in a way that matches the multi-sampled shape of a true portfolio more nearly than that of any single-sampled assessment.

## On the Edge

As we write, submissions have not reached full force; stronger currents will catch us next year. If our portfolio works, it will be because we designed for large numbers from the start, because we kept past failures in mind, integrated all necessary elements (politics, design, and infrastructure) and, finally, because we are personally committed to the concept, perhaps foolishly so as the barrel-over-Niagara metaphor suggests. Although it takes a level of foolish nerve to believe we can pull this off, thus far the signs are good: several departments are implementing portfolios at the senior level; faculty are calling the Writing Center for help integrating writing into their curriculum; we have the support of our administrators; and most of the students who have submitted already have responded positively. With any luck, the ride will be easier than anticipated and we can think ahead to our next project: jumping Hell’s canyon on a motorcycle.

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## Notes

1. For a description of the design for our freshman placement exam, including a copy of the exam itself, see Haswell and Wyche-Smith.
2. We keep copies of both the placement examination and the impromptu portion of the junior portfolio for a period of five years. This allows faculty involved in assessing the general education program to draw samples at a later date, separate from the evaluation of individual students. The placement examination provides baseline data and, in conjunction with the junior-level writing, supplies for longitudinal studies. The samples of writing also can be used by faculty and graduate students for purposes of research. If students are willing to release their writing for research, we ask them to indicate this on the information sheet they fill out when they take the exams. Eighty-two percent are willing.
3. We have used this unorthodox system now for two years in reading freshman essays for placement. Follow-up studies show that placements generated through only one reading under this system have high reliability and validity. Of once-read essays that were recirculated (unmarked), 96.3 percent received the same placement. Of 100 randomly chosen students placed into regular freshman composition through one reading, only five did not pass the course and only one left evidence that the failure to earn credit was due to inability to meet course standards. Of these 100, only one was judged by the regular-composition teacher as better placed in the basic course. A little over 65 percent of placement essays had to be read only once. This represents a sizeable savings in time and money. Compared to our system, the most efficient holistic readings, where all essays are initially read by two independent readers and then about 15 percent are read a third time, requires 40 to 45 percent more readings (we recently learned that comparable figures were achieved at University of Pittsburg by William Smith, using a similar process which he refers to as the "Expert Model" of assessing writing). For a description of the two-tier system used for placement in our freshman writing program, see Haswell and Wyche-Smith.

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## Appendix A

### *WSU Writing Qualifying Examination: Rationale for Using Portfolios*

Washington State University will soon require all undergraduates at the "rising junior" level to take a **Writing Qualifying Examination**. It will be first offered in spring 1993. Students admitted as freshmen in the fall of 1991 or thereafter must pass the Writing Qualifying Examination to be eligible for graduation (see *WSU 91-93 Bulletin*, p. iii). Students must take the examination after completing English 101 or its equivalent and before the end of the first semester after attaining 60 credit hours; transfer students are allowed to postpone taking it until their second semester of full-time enrollment at WSU or until completing a total of 15 additional credit hours.

Students who are unsuccessful on the Writing Qualifying Examination will be required to complete additional preparation. Such preparation might include a tutorial program in the WSU Writing Center or completion of an appropriate composition course. These requirements should be satisfied as quickly as possible, since one purpose of the examination is to qualify students to take the required upper-division writing-intensive [M] courses in their majors.

The Senate gave the All University Writing Committee the task of designing and implementing the examination, and the first part of that task is done. The examination will consist of a portfolio of the student's writings. The portfolio will contain (1) a selection of the student's papers from previous coursework, and (2) a timed writing examination.

The All University Writing Committee has chosen to define the Writing Qualifying Examination as a portfolio for several reasons. There is a large body of evidence that a single, timed, impromptu test is a very unreliable measure of writing ability. Fluency under pressure will be tested, but as only one of the skills needed by WSU students. Using a student writing portfolio containing examples of several kinds of assignments provides both a larger sample and a broader range of student abilities for the examiners to evaluate and thereby greatly increases the validity of the examination. The portfolio, consisting of papers from previous course work certified as such by the instructor, also establishes a useful relationship between the examination and the undergraduate curriculum. Ideally, the Writing Qualifying Examination can become a form of writing assessment that supports curriculum as well as assesses student progress through it.

Although a portfolio system presents problems of implementation that are more complex than those involved in a single, timed, essay examination, experience at other institutions suggests that these problems can be solved. More importantly, there will be positive outcomes that easily compensate for the additional effort. With a student writing portfolio, the university acquires a fairer, more accurate measure of students' writing abilities at approximately the mid-point of their academic careers; simultaneously, students with problems are identified and can be given assistance in a timely fashion, while there is still

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opportunity for improvement. Through use of the portfolio, the institutional emphasis on good writing can extend through nearly the entire curriculum rather than confine itself to English composition courses. Once approved, the individual student's portfolio will continue to be of use for departmental advising and for the student's later job searching. Statistical results from the Writing Qualifying Examination will also form part of the university's program of assessment of educational outcomes, and efforts will be made to convert those results into program improvements.

*What changes will the Examination require of individual teachers in their undergraduate courses?* Preparing a portfolio requires students to ask teachers to certify papers that have been submitted as part of a course; in most cases, this certification will require no more time than it takes to sign off on a form provided by the student.

*How much more time and energy will teachers have to commit to writing instruction?* The Writing Portfolio does not *require* instructors to add writing assignments to courses. It may, however, encourage some instructors to ask more formal writing from students, particularly in general education courses, and thus it may bring about changes in writing assignments that are already part of a course. The portfolio portion of the examination may also encourage instructors to assign and respond to early drafts of papers, as this is one way of increasing the likelihood that students' work is their own.

## Call for Papers: Hypertext and Composition

Scott Lloyd DeWitt and Kip Strasma invite submissions for a collection of essays that explores the issues of hypertext, empirical research, and writing pedagogy entitled, *Empirical Inquiry into Hypertextualizing Composition*. Submissions should describe empirical research studies that investigate the influence of hypertext on students' writing processes. We are especially interested in submissions that represent diverse teaching strategies and sites (K-12, two-year college, university, etc.). Writers should prepare a two-page, single spaced proposal that reveals the study's focus, its research methodology, and its current status. Submit two copies of your proposal by 1 February 1995 to Scott Lloyd DeWitt, The Ohio State University-Marion Campus, 1465 Mt. Vernon Ave., Morrill Hall, Marion, OH, 43302-5695, or e-mail one copy to dewitt.18@osu.edu and to kstrasma@heartland.bradley.edu.