

In 1998, teaching portfolios were being used in 500 postsecondary institutions in the United States (Talburtt 19). This growing use of teaching portfolios to educate, professionally develop, and evaluate both new and experienced instructors is not surprising. Teaching portfolios have become popular for several reasons. First, they encourage teachers and administrators to place emphasis and value on teaching, to acknowledge what Ernest Boyer has called "the scholarship of teaching" (*passim*). As such, they are one response to recent dissatisfaction with and calls for improvement of teaching at the university level. Teaching portfolios allow institutions and departments to document for outside audiences, including administrators and the public, the teaching work of faculty in the academy.

Second, teaching portfolios are often seen as an improvement over earlier ways to evaluate teachers, including student evaluations and single observations. Portfolios generally include a rich, complex collection of documents that a teacher selects and annotates. Teachers are able to theoretically ground and contextualize their practice and offer examples of development in response to changing cultural, institutional, and disciplinary demands. Teachers are thus more actively involved in the evaluation process and evaluators are able to "see" more evidence of teaching practice.

Finally, and perhaps most salient for the field of rhetoric and composition and our discussion here, teaching portfolios (indeed, portfolios in general) are celebrated for their potential to encourage reflection and the

*More Than  
Meets the Eye:  
Teaching  
Portfolios as  
Sites of  
Institutional  
and  
Disciplinary  
Inquiry*

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(identity) development of a reflective practitioner. In the early article "Portfolios for Teachers: Writing Our Way to Reflective Practice," for instance, Chris Anson includes a lengthy discussion about the ways that teaching portfolios encourage reflective practice; he maintains that portfolios allow teachers to progress from "experiential" to "professional" evidence of their development. In explaining reflection as the central component of portfolios, Anson argues that writing and sharing reflections with one another allow teachers to improve their pedagogies: "Ideally, teachers can meet in small focus groups to circulate and discuss drafts of their reflections and philosophies. Revisions of primary [classroom-oriented] or secondary [reflective] documents can then lead to changed attitudes and improved teaching strategies" (189). Likewise, in the 1997 collection *Situating Portfolios: Four Perspectives*, Robert P. Yagelski writes that the "potential of the portfolio to promote self-evaluation among student writers also makes it a powerful vehicle for critical reflection in the training of preservice English teachers" (225). And in her introduction to the 1998 collection *With Portfolio in Hand: Validating the New Teacher Professionalism*, Nona Lyons describes teaching portfolios as "a personal learning experience, powerful in the kind of reflective process it fosters" (17).

That WPAs and teacher-educators place such emphasis on the ways to encourage reflective practice is not surprising given the value our field places on reflection as a means to improve our theories and practices. We, too, acknowledge the power of portfolios to encourage reflection on the part of students and teachers, but our concern is that if the field focuses solely on the ways that teaching portfolios encourage reflection and the construction of a reflective teaching identity, we fail to explore how those reflective narratives are constructions and we obscure what those constructions might suggest about portfolio readers and the institutional contexts that shape reflective documents. In short, we argue that paying more attention to the constructed nature of teaching identities found in portfolios can help WPAs to become more reflective about a program's stated and unstated curricula, policies, and expectations for teaching.

Most current accounts of teaching portfolio use present portfolios as an empowering means through which faculty, graduate students, and student/teachers can evaluate their teaching practices and justify those pedagogies with theoretical and experiential evidence (see, for instance, Seldin; Murray; Edgerton, Hutchings, and Quinlan). What we believe these

positive accounts fail to fully address, however, are the power relationships present when teachers critically reflect on their pedagogies in portfolio documents. Such critical reflection in the case of the teacher constructing a portfolio is very rarely happening in solitude. The identity construction in a portfolio takes place under the gaze of a teacher or administrator who reads the reflection(s) it contains—and then often assesses it and/or the writer as a course or departmental requirement. And there are often significant consequences of that assessment: a good grade in a teacher education course, favorable teaching assignments or schedules, or even promotion. It is thus reasonable to assume that readers and context affect the process of reflection and the way reflective narratives are told. While teaching portfolios may indeed encourage reflective practice, teachers filter their reflections through a constructed identity meant to appease evaluative readers. Thus teaching portfolios cannot be read as if they are unmediated demonstrations of lived or learned knowledge. Rather, we need to acknowledge that teaching portfolios are shaped in part through complex power relationships among teachers, WPAs, and institutional and disciplinary values, and we need to explore what such power relationships mean for our uses of teaching portfolios.

In the discussion that follows, we begin with a theoretical exploration of the complex power negotiations that surround the construction of teaching portfolio documents, particularly teaching philosophies and other reflective narratives, and we review the literature about teaching portfolios with respect to such theoretical analyses. Ultimately we argue, as Carrie Shively Leverenz and Amy Goodburn do in their recent *WPA* article, against using teaching portfolios for the simultaneous evaluation and development of individual teachers. Instead, we suggest that teaching portfolios can be read in ways that acknowledge the constructed nature of teaching identities and that focus on portfolios as reflections of writing programs and the larger discipline rather than as evidence of individual teacher development.

In her recent book on reflection, Kathleen Blake Yancey likens the reflective documents in student portfolios to autobiography: the students are creating themselves as writers in the act of evaluating their writing. Yancey reminds us that "any self we see within a text, particularly autobiography but reflection-in-presentation<sup>1</sup> as well, is multiple, is *shaped*, is constructed; is necessarily contingent, transitory, filled with *tension*" (73). The same is true of teachers and teacher portfolios—teachers create teaching selves through

reflection on their own theories and practices. In many uses of teaching portfolios, they then turn those "selves" over to evaluative individuals or groups.

In *Fragments of Rationality*, Lester Faigley likens the self-presentations of students to the "confessions" that Foucault explores in *The History of Sexuality*. Foucault observes that confessions have become a regular part of most people's daily lives—we confess to family members, to clergy, to doctors, to teachers. Confessions are

a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile. (58)

The confession (and its judgment, punishment, and reconciliation) is linked to Foucault's theories of discipline and the self, for it is the means by which institutions and governing bodies can regulate and control individuals in order to reinforce and replicate existing power structures. We think that teaching portfolio documents, particularly teaching philosophies or reflections on theory and practice, function as confessionals,<sup>2</sup> for they are required in most teaching portfolio designs by WPAs who hold power over GTAs and adjunct faculty. The reflective documents themselves require writers to take on at least partially submissive stances, as they must tell the story of teachers' development to internalize programmatic standards and often will be read by WPAs who base evaluative decisions on the quality of those confessionals. We think it is important to think about teaching portfolios in these Foucauldian terms because, as assessments or instruments of teacher development by WPAs, they are exercises of power through written discourse. As Susan Talburt argues,

As a disciplinary tactic, portfolios may provide an increasingly sophisticated technique of monitoring faculty development toward codified norms of effective teaching.

As a mode of confession, portfolios do not simply allow a truth of teaching to surface but are constructed in the context

of administrative power that defines the terms by which teaching can be evaluated. (23)

When viewed through a Foucauldian lens, teaching portfolios become more than representations of a teacher's theories and practices; rather, they become a site of power struggle and identity negotiation, a space that illustrates a Foucauldian notion of power as a reciprocal relationship.

Because power, for Foucault, is a relationship between subject and agent rather than a centralized, all-subsuming force, "power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free" (*Power/Knowledge* 221). This is an important point to highlight: power only functions as a reciprocal relationship, whereby the subject is induced to behave in a particular way when he or she can behave differently. Power is inextricably tied to freedom of choice. F. Allan Hanson ties this role of the perception of freedom to the way that testing subjectifies humans in western culture:

This is the basis for a remarkable advance made by testing in the field of social control: it enlists people as *willing accomplices* in their own surveillance and domination. The system is set up in such a way that if people hope to reach their goals, they must actively strive to comply with expectations embedded in tests regarding what they should and should not do. (emphasis added, 5)

Clearly, this "social control" is possible only because people understand the consequences of resisting assessments: to not be tested is to be unknown, indiscernible, indescribable, and invisible to institutional structures that depend on "knowing" subjects. To be tested is to open oneself up to earning certain privileges and to having a fixed identity in the first place. But the power to decide the consequences of that fixed identity and the extent to which privileges are granted resides with the tests and the people conducting the testing.

Perhaps most important throughout Foucault's work on power and subjectivity is his understanding of the subject as a willing participant and of the way in which that willingness to be dominated strengthens and intensifies power. People subject themselves to educational institutions and to testing in order to achieve particular goals: economic security, personal achievement, and cultural status. They do so because to be counted within our culture requires one to be tested, defined, disciplined, normalized, and

certified. In the case of teaching portfolios used for evaluative purposes, teachers are rewarded for successful reflective documents and accounts of classroom theory and practice with plum teaching assignments, renewed contracts, or even job security.

In "The Structures of Punishment," Foucault uses the example of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon prison design to illustrate the way that subjects are co-opted into power relationships, even learning to regulate their own behaviors. The Panopticon's structure—a series of prison cells arranged around an all-seeing tower—is a means of "dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen" (*Discipline* 109). The most important feature of the Panopticon is that "it automatizes and disindividualizes power" (109); the question of whether or not an observer is actually in the central tower becomes moot as prisoners monitor and alter their behaviors based upon the perception that they are being watched. In the case of the Panopticon, power is not located in the tower; rather, power is internalized by prisoners, becoming a complex relationship between observer and observed. Power is about who sees and who is seen.

Foucault extends this understanding of power as a relationship and the concept of the self-regulatory effects of observation into a discussion of examinations, entitled "The Means of Correct Training." There, Foucault explains that "far from preventing knowledge, power produces it" (*Power/Knowledge* 59) through the structure and ritualized nature of examinations. For Foucault, the examination is a particularly notable exercise of power because its success depends on "hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and their combination" (*Discipline* 170). Hierarchical observation "is the disciplinary gaze, a way of permit[ting] an internal, articulated and detailed control [. . .] [that can] transform individuals; to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them" (172). The Panopticon is an architectural representation of this knowing, this observation, as it "would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly" (173). But the examination allows this gaze to not only be all-seeing, but also corrective through normalizing judgment. Normalizing judgment "brings subjects in line with what is expected of them; it has as its function reducing gaps" and "it must therefore be essentially *corrective*"

(179). The threat of being punished is ever-present, but importantly, so also is the possibility of reward.

The effect of this normalization in any assessment of teaching is that teachers are doubly subjectified: they are defined by the assessment and its results, but then they are further defined by the ways their rewards or punishments open up or close doors to them. We realize that portfolios are in part intended to subvert the precise, "objective" nature of tests in which those tested receive "accurate" and comparable scores because they give teachers the ability to construct their own accounts of teaching. However, we think all assessments are exercises of power and share features with the examination as Foucault describes it. Teaching portfolios, like tests, are a means of shaping individuals to prescribed standards, and like more traditional assessment tools, they carry with them significant consequences for individuals. But perhaps most importantly, portfolios require teachers not just to demonstrate that their theories and practices fit within those that are accepted by the writing program administration, but portfolios are also a means of requiring teachers to make their teaching public and accountable to others—they require teachers to be "willing accomplices in their own surveillance and domination" (Hanson 5).

Teaching portfolios *can* be rich sources of information about individual and collective teachers' theories and practices. In various programs in which we have participated, teachers are required in their portfolios to include documents such as class syllabi for all courses they have taught, course evaluations filled out by their students, assignment sheets, a vita, and observation reports written by faculty members. Teachers are also encouraged to submit student work that they have responded to, narratives about assignments that worked especially well in their classes or that they would improve the next time they taught the course, handouts they gave to their students, publications and projects their students constructed, and other classroom documents or reflective writings. The depth and breadth of this information is one reason why portfolios are billed as such an effective method of encouraging teachers to reflect on their theory and their practices: teachers are encouraged to see and write about connections among the separate documents, and to reflect on the ways that their practices support and further their theories about writing and learning.

As such, portfolios offer much more access to information about teachers than the usual student course evaluations and faculty observation

reports might allow. Teachers' opportunities to include more information in a portfolio clearly have potential benefits, as teachers have more agency in constructing their identities for evaluative readers than they do when departments use only course evaluations and observation reports to assess teaching. On the other hand, however unlikely it might be that a composition program would use teaching portfolios as evidence to not renew a teacher's contract or to sanction a teacher for poor or unethical teaching practices, an administration's increased access to documentation may make teachers feel that portfolios could culminate in exercises of power against them.

In the chapter "Ideologies of the Self in Writing Evaluation," Faigley contends that teachers' comments on student texts judged as "good writing" clearly show that most teachers evaluate students' autobiographical writing according to the kind of "self" that the students present. If we liken reflections in teaching portfolios to confessions, and then consider what Foucault and Faigley show us about how such confessional "selves" are evaluated and disciplined, we must consider how and what we evaluate when we require and read a teaching portfolio, and what those evaluations allow or create. We must interrogate our uses of teaching portfolios and their fit with our assumptions about knowledge and ethical practice.

Most teaching portfolio scholarship does not seem to address the potentially negative effects of "gazes" on the construction of portfolio documents. Much current scholarship suggests that teaching portfolios can be a space where teachers can present their personal "assumptions about teaching and learning, [assumptions] shaped by the portfolio maker" (Lyons 4). In "A Different Understanding," for example, Pearl R. Paulson and F. Leon Paulson include many examples of critical reflections written by students in their teacher education course. Some of these reflections clearly indicated that the student/teachers recognized the reader's role in the construction of a teacher's identity, and the student/teachers selected their portfolio documents accordingly. However, while Paulson and Paulson cite their students' reflections as evidence of development or students laying claim to individualized theories and pedagogies, Paulson and Paulson allow no room for exploration of how their own positions of power as teacher educators and evaluators may complicate those reflections and what those teachers were willing to say. In fact, Paulson and Paulson end their article with the claim that "By constructing portfolios for themselves, [students] constructed



a personal concept of 'portfolio' and its place in learning and assessment" (292). This argument for portfolios as sites of individual ownership of theory and pedagogy does not acknowledge the social, political, and contextual forces that shape writers' concerns and choices about what to include and exclude, or about how to present documents to appeal to a particular audience. Our discipline has little information about how portfolio writers' awareness of evaluating readers shapes the primary and secondary documents in a teacher's portfolio. Certainly the "longer, studied gazes" of colleagues and administrators would affect the way that teachers characterize their theories and practices. As Foucault reminds us, assessment can be a subtle and pervasive process that has the power to construct identities for individuals. If we accept the view that identities are discursively produced, we must acknowledge and explore the reader's role in the production of a teaching identity more fully than current teaching portfolio scholarship has done.

In "Portfolios as a Way to Encourage Reflective Practice Among Preservice English Teachers," Yagelski acknowledges that there may be some student resistance to constructing teaching portfolios. He writes that in the class he taught

[The student teachers] felt a tension between the role of professional educator—which in many ways our portfolio system encouraged them to adopt—and their official status as students. [. . .] [I]n this case, the tensions created problems that we had not foreseen and which we needed to respond to during the semester. Some students were frustrated by the lack of specific requirements for the portfolios. They saw flexibility as a liability, one that made it difficult for them to determine what they needed to do to achieve a good grade. In retrospect, we realize that this tension grew out of their desire to do well in the course and perhaps their unfamiliarity with adopting the perspective of a professional educator. (238)

Yagelski concludes that teacher educators need to recognize the tensions between the grading and the development of student/teachers, and that they should tailor their portfolio use to account for these tensions (238). Leverenz and Goodburn echo such sentiments::

We wish only to caution TA educators to be clear about their

purposes for requiring new teachers to write teaching philosophies and construct teaching portfolios—sometimes before they have even set foot in a classroom or while they are teaching their very first class—and to realize that this rush to employ teaching portfolios with a view toward professionalization (i.e. representing one's teaching for the job market) might shortchange the type of reflective inquiry and self-criticism that, according to Christine Farris, promotes more effective writing programs and teacher change. (14)

In justifying the importance of critical reflection as evidence of professional development, Paulson and Paulson, Yagelski, and Yancey end their articles with what prove to be positive student reflections. In these reflections, students report that their experiences with the portfolios were beneficial. Paulson and Paulson end their article with one student's claim that "I have a totally different understanding of the procedure as I have gone through the experience" (292). Likewise, Yancey ends her article with a student quotation that she points to as evidence of student resistance: "I was terrified of you and of this class for probably half the semester because I had to think for myself, and that was something that I had not done in a long time. The coolest part about this, though, is that once I got comfortable thinking for myself, it started spilling over into my other classes as well" (261).

On the one hand, we believe that these student/teacher voices are important to hear, as they describe the frustrations and satisfaction that teachers experience in constructing teaching portfolios. On the other hand, we are uncomfortable with the way that instances of student "resistance" have been subsumed into the dominant discourse about the benefits of reflection in teaching portfolios rather than recognized as calls for more study into the complexities of requiring new and experienced teachers to construct portfolios for evaluation. After all, the goal of most portfolio reflection in GTA education classes and department programs is to encourage teachers to critically analyze and rethink their pedagogies. In both cases, teachers are rewarded for their ability to do such critical analysis. Whether or not these teachers actually are changed by the experience of putting together a portfolio is not certain. What is possible is that these teachers are able to write convincing "conversion narratives"—accounts that seemingly testify to the effectiveness of portfolios as supporting reflective practice, but that might really indicate that portfolios

are a means by which teachers construct an identity to appease an evaluator for material consequences, including grades, academic and teaching recognition, and plum class assignments and teaching schedules.

What we see in teaching portfolios may, then, be as much—if not more—a product of the institutional forces that shape the context of the composing situation and the writer's perception of her audience than a "real" narrative of learning. This is sobering, especially when teaching portfolios are, in current scholarship, billed as places where administrators are able to see personal and professional growth—and where such "growth" has significant consequences and rewards.

Our discussion here suggests several important points to consider about the field-wide use of teaching portfolios in composition programs. First, we need more research into how teaching portfolio use affects the individuals actually constructing portfolios for evaluative readers. Because the perceived evaluative nature of portfolios may override the reflective concerns of teachers constructing them, teaching portfolios may become exercises of power that inhibit the process of reflection as an ongoing process and contribute to the replication of existing institutional structures. Moreover, we need more research that explores the ways teaching portfolios are read, and the consequences of those readings on individual teachers.

Our discussion also suggests that we as a field need to examine with a critical eye our own literature about and uses of teaching portfolios in order to better understand how portfolios are being characterized and what our assumptions about teaching portfolios leave out or open up for inquiry. We might, for instance, more thoroughly consider what foregrounding the construction of portfolio identities can teach us, as a discipline and in individual departments. Teaching portfolios can demonstrate how teachers interact with programmatic requirements and curricula. We believe that reading teaching portfolios with the knowledge that teachers are most certainly attempting to "fairly represent" their theories and practices while also appealing to audiences who hold positions of power over them can yield valuable information about a writing program's theories and values. Instead of being read to evaluate whether a teacher is developing an acceptable teaching self, or whether a teacher is "toeing the party line," teaching portfolios can be read as narratives about what a particular writing program values. Readers (and writers) of teaching portfolios can begin to explore questions such as these: what are the conflicts our teachers face in becoming a part of our writing program's community? what are the

common narratives about teaching, about learning, about writing that circulate throughout our program? what do teachers' carefully constructed reflective narratives reveal about our program's values? do we want to encourage the continuation of such a construction of our department, or consider ways to change its construction? Reading portfolios in this way allows them transformative power, as they become a means for programmatic reflection and potential change.

We must acknowledge portfolios as sites of power and negotiation if we are to use them ethically. More explicitly recognizing the political complexity of teaching portfolios could bring us closer to answering the call that Talburt issues in "Teaching Portfolios: Uses Beyond Accountability," a call that our field seems particularly well-suited to answer. Talburt argues for viewing teaching portfolios as a site of action research:

Portfolio development as inquiry that moves beyond reflective-technical models to include a critical social dimension would shift the location of instructional improvement from individual classroom practices to include the workings of universities themselves.

Such inquiry could include examination of the relations of institutional, faculty, and student needs and demands, the dynamics of race, class, gender, and sexuality in structuring classroom interactions, and the relations of curricular offerings to classroom practices. (24)

Talburt asks that we view teaching portfolios not as places of accountability and documentation but instead as sites of critical inquiry and transformation. They can be places where we can begin to question the values and constructions of institutions that essentially guide our current teaching practices, so that such institutions and values are always open to criticism and change. By extension, such use of teaching portfolios might move us toward the transformative reflection we as a field value and seek.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Blake Yancey defines "reflection-in-presentation" as "the formal reflective text written for an 'other,' often in a rhetorical situation invoking assessment" (Reflection 13).

<sup>2</sup> We wish to thank Peggy O'Neill for bringing to our attention the role that reflective writing plays in regulating discourse about writers and

writing. Her "Analyzing Trends in Writing Assessment: Portfolio as Panopticon, Reflection as Confession," is a more extended critique of reflective writing in portfolio assessment than we offer here.

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