

Using a Learning Portfolio in an Upper Level Course

by Judy Hunter

Portfolios are a way of teaching that encourages feedback and revision, that lets students reflect on their work, and that allows students to control their own learning. Kent McClelland has been experimenting with portfolios for some time now, and the system he has developed may offer helpful hints for those interested in the method.

Kent's system carefully integrates the portfolio with the objectives of the course. The syllabus sets out six or seven learning objectives. For example, learning objective number six for his upper level seminar in conflict resolution is "to survey several of the more contemporary sociological and psychological perspectives on conflict and violence." Related to the objectives are a set of "responsibilities to the class." For example, responsibility number two is "to work with the instructor and possibly a team of other students to plan and lead classroom presentations about one or more of the contemporary theories [mentioned in] learning objective six." Given those objectives and those responsibilities, students create an individualized work plan which demonstrates that they have met the objectives and fulfilled the responsibilities.

Within certain constraints, the students are free to demonstrate their learning in whatever way they prefer; for example, they set their own due dates and timetables, and they decide what weight in the final grade each piece of work should carry. As Kent tells them in his syllabus,

My intention is to treat you as mature and independently motivated learners by giving you considerable control over your own assignments and grading. Within some limits, I will expect you to plan your own assignments and then take responsibility for carrying them out.

To fulfill this goal, each student must complete, within the first three weeks of the semester, a work plan that details assignments, due dates, and dates when drafts will be completed. Each consults individually with Kent about this plan in order to get his approval; each student revises the plan until both parties are satisfied with it; then both parties sign and date it. From that point, the student is responsible for completing the work described in the individualized plan; each gives Kent a progress report every two weeks detailing what has been done and what is left to do.

Thus, throughout the semester, Kent receives drafts of work from students, reads them, and returns them with comments and suggestions for revision. In this way he emphasizes the point that academic work is not something one does at midnight to turn in the next morning, but something that one revises, making changes in response to feedback. He hopes to teach students that writers don't create a final product in only one draft; they return to the paper again and again after others have read and responded to it. In some ways, he is teaching them the professional model of how academics write.

At midterm and at the end of the semester, each student turns in a portfolio, together with the student's own assessment of the quality of that work and the progress it represents. Kent assigns grades to the student work, and, while he finds that some students underestimate what they've

done and some overestimate, most often he and they agree on the grade. While some teachers may fear that such a system would inflate grades, he finds that the grades he gives on portfolios are not much different than they were before he used the system.

Kent uses his syllabus to communicate to students his requirements for their work plans, to express the kind of substance he expects to see in their work. In doing so, he offers them a default, an approach they can use if they don't think of one on their own. This default plan models the level of difficulty and work that he expects. For example, in his conflict resolution course he expects students to demonstrate their learning through three methods: academic research, active participation, and experiential learning. The syllabus suggests default plans for all three areas:

Your first work plan . . . will need to include at least three projects. The centerpiece of this plan will be the review of academic literature described in objective three. The "default" project here is a ten- to fifteen-page library research paper. Another possibility might be a series of short papers on aspects of your chosen topic, or else a fairly elaborate plan for class presentation including an annotated bibliography or other informative handouts and a short formal paper for other students to read in preparation for the session. In any case, I expect that your plan for meeting objective three will include a formal academic paper.

A second project in your work plan must provide evidence that you have completed the assigned readings and have taken an intellectually active part in class discussion or other activities. . . . This project might involve a weekly journal, a series of discussion papers on assigned readings, or perhaps weekly contributions to an email "chat-line" with other members of the class. Yet another excellent choice would be for several students to form an out-of-class discussion group and then rotate the responsibility for writing a weekly report on their proceedings.

A third project should describe a plan for experiential learning by means of direct contact with practitioners in conflict-resolution, broadly defined. An hour or two a week of volunteer work at the Iowa Peace Institute would fill the bill, and we will be meeting the people at that agency. You may wish instead to schedule a couple of visits to agencies in Des Moines, Newton, or Iowa City and to interview the practitioners and clients or observe the programs there. Yet another possibility might be to arrange a semester-break career-preview experience with a conflict-resolution practitioner through the Alumni Office or the CDO. Whatever you decide to do, your project should include plans for reporting to the class on your experience.

By suggesting several ways in which students can meet the learning objectives, Kent hopes that students can choose methods of learning that play to their strengths; he hopes they can set up assignments that allow them to demonstrate their learning through something they like to do and can do well.

Such a system is of course not problem-free, for either students or teacher. Students don't necessarily like this much freedom. As Kent realizes, they are used to being told what to do and may find it unsettling to have to make the decision themselves. Teachers may find such a process more time-consuming than other methods of evaluation. Kent consults with students individually about the assignments they have designed; he monitors the progress they make throughout the

semester; he sees and comments on multiple drafts; he keeps track of when projects come in and when he returns them. Kent has found help with one small part of the increased work load: after much experimentation, he developed an Excel spread sheet that helps him to figure grades, since each student has different numbers of projects and each project is assigned a different weight.

Despite the student reservations and teacher problems created by this system, Kent obviously feels comfortable with it, for he is using it in several classes. He points out one strong advantage of this method: it releases students' imagination and creativity. He reports, "I sometimes get projects which are far more interesting than anything I might have thought to assign myself. And grading the portfolios is far less boring than correcting exams or reading stacks of nearly identical papers."

In general, Kent contrasts this portfolio method with the "gas and go" model of education. In that model, the knowledge is possessed by the teacher; the student fills up with it and then heads out. In contrast, Kent says, his system forces students to look for the gas station. That is, it makes them responsible for their own learning, for thinking about what they are learning, for evaluating what it is worth, and for planning how to achieve it. It asks them to reflect on their learning, to look at projects in terms of their learning goals. In sum, this portfolio evaluation method makes students active learners.