

Portfolio Power: Building Student Confidence, Motivation, and Reflection in the ESL Classroom

ポートフォリオの力 : ESL クラスにおける学生の自信,
モチベーションの向上と振り返り

Dean, Eric S.¹

ディーン エリック S.²

Abstract

Student portfolios have become popular among educators in recent years because they often provide a more accurate picture of what students are learning and how they feel about the work they are doing in class. This paper outlines some of the elements key to creating a successful portfolio framework. It describes the portfolio process used in Seminar class at Tokai University's Hokkaido Campus and comments on how student portfolios can lead to increased levels of student confidence, motivation, and self-reflection skills.

要旨

近年、学生によるポートフォリオが教育者の間で話題になっている。その理由に学生が授業で何を学んでいるか、どう感じているかがそこに明確に現れているという事が挙げられる。本論文では、ポートフォリオの骨子を作成する際に重要な鍵となるいくつかのポイントについて概説する。さらに、東海大学 北海道キャンパスにおけるゼミナールクラスでのポートフォリオの指導を例に、学生によるポートフォリオがどのように学生の自信向上につながり、モチベーションアップそして自分自身を的確に振り返る手がかりとなるかを論じる。

Keywords: Portfolio, English Communication, Presentation, Student Motivation, Reflective Writing

キーワード: ポートフォリオ, 英語コミュニケーション, プレゼンテーション, 学生のモチベーション, 内省的作文

1. Introduction

One of the more popular curriculum trends in education in recent years has been the emergence of portfolio-based assessment. Much more than a simple collection of student

¹ Department of International Communications, School of International Cultural Relation, 5-1-1-1 Minamisawa, Minami-ku, Sapporo 005-8601, Japan

² 東海大学国際文化学部国際コミュニケーション学科, 005-8601 札幌市南区南沢 5 条 1 丁目 1-1

papers and class assignments, portfolios can give teachers a clearer picture of what their students are learning in class. Portfolios can reveal how students feel about their academic accomplishments and what areas may require more practice and attention. Rolheiser, Bower & Stevahn (2000) observe that,

Successful portfolios are a powerful communication tool for both students and teacher alike. New insights into the minds of students and their developmental processes often surface, and teachers can understand their student's needs, feelings, and accomplishments better than any test or traditional assessment tool can provide.

This paper demonstrates how portfolios can serve as an effective mechanism for student research and report writing, oral presentations, and self-reflection. It outlines some of the important elements and concepts used in building a successful portfolio framework, and illustrates one portfolio approach used in English seminar classes at Tokai University. It attempts to show how the process of creating portfolios can boost student involvement and motivation in class activities, foster critical thinking skills and self-reflection, increase student responsibility and ownership, and ultimately enrich the learning process.

2. Discussion

By establishing a collaborative process that includes free choice and self-reflection, portfolio creation can contribute to the learning environment by getting students involved and excited about their schoolwork. When given the freedom to choose their own research topics and the method to showcase and present this work, students often display higher levels of interest and motivation. Having a voice in this creative process can also strengthen confidence and self-esteem. Newman, Smolen & Lee (1995) find that,

Proponents of portfolios report that one of the major advantages of the portfolio process is that it is a means of empowering students to become active partners and decision makers in their own learning.

By allowing students free choice about portfolio categories and entry selections, student responsibility is heightened and a greater sense of ownership can settle in. This leads to better writing and editing, personalized sharing, and opens up new avenues of learning, growth, and reflection. Varvus (1990) believes the ongoing process of developing the portfolio is an ideal opportunity to involve students in making decisions about their work. She states,

In order to participate in the construction of portfolios, students must reflect on their work. In the process, they develop the ability to monitor their own progress. With

practice like this, students will learn to recognize a broader range of qualities in their work. For example, students may go from first rating their work based on neatness or spelling accuracy to noticing word choice, clarity of expression, use of imagination, or possibilities for revision. When student insights are valued as portfolios are assembled, student responsibility for learning grows.

Because self-reflection is such an integral part of any portfolio process, teachers should implement a process that gets students to think about the work they have done. Stiggins (2005) emphasizes the importance of reflection, stating,

Reflecting on what has been learned and articulating that learning to others is at the heart and soul of the learning process. Reflection is linked to essential elements of learning and cognitive development: (1) metacognition development, (2) the ability to self-evaluate, (3) the development of critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making, and (4) the enhancement of teacher understanding of the learner.

3. Description of Methods

In this study, portfolios were introduced at the beginning of the semester to eleven Japanese students at Tokai University's Hokkaido campus. All students were third year English majors pursuing a degree in international communications. The English proficiency of all participants was in the upper intermediate range. The seminar class focused on American culture, and met for two 90-minute periods each week over the course of a fifteen-week semester. Seminar classes are ideal for student portfolios and can involve a fair amount of instructor lecture, guided discussion, short videos or documentary films, written homework assignments, and textbook readings. The portfolio process used in this class consisted of four main steps: (1) collaboratively selecting a weekly homework assignment, (2) creating entry pages after researching and writing about the topic, (3) presenting portfolios to peers, and (4) writing a short, self-reflective piece about the portfolio entries.

The textbook chosen for this seminar class was the cultural reader *All About the USA Book 4* by Milada Broukal & Janet Milhomme (2008). Weekly readings on a variety of cultural topics served as talking points in class and as a springboard for students to research and report upon further. Relevant topics included important historical events in America, inventions, biographies of notable people, and customs and traditions around holidays (see examples in Appendix B). Each of these topics provided rich and interesting content for students to explore further.

Early in the semester, teacher-guided portfolio homework assignments were given to students. The following is one such example: “Describe your favorite American holiday. Comment on the traditions, food, and decorations that go with this event. Write about your personal experiences. Include photos with captions, hand-drawn artwork, or downloaded images to give your portfolio entry visual flair. Minimum length: A two page magazine-style spread.” Students would then use the school library or computer lab to research and create their portfolio pages in an A4 sized clear file book. The following week, each student would do a mini presentation and show their portfolio entries to peers in small groups of three or four. Students who were listening would ask questions about the content and provide oral feedback to those presenting. After presentations were finished, students would spend 15-20 minutes writing a reflection sheet (see example in Appendix A), commenting on their work, what they learned, and any peer feedback they may have received. In terms of error correction, the instructor would collect the portfolios every three weeks, provide feedback and notes to students and give them the option of revising their pages. Most students appreciated this editing advice and made revisions; others chose not to make any changes. The thinking behind this process was to encourage student creativity and openness, and not to be too heavy handed in terms of teacher influence or having perfect English grammar on every page. When students revised their work, both the original draft and the revised drafts were displayed side by side to show both students and readers the stages of the editing process.

While students were given autonomy and freedom to design their entry pages, certain documents in the class portfolios were specifically assigned by the instructor and included the following elements:

(1) A Title Page. This page included the student’s name, class title, instructor’s name, and the academic year. Students were given the choice to add graphics and /or photos to add a visual element to the page.

(2) Table of Contents. This page was added to summarize the portfolio and make it easier for the reader to follow. Page numbers were included for easy navigation.

(3) Introduction Letters from Student and Teacher. Student letters served to personalize the portfolio and crystallize the purpose and feelings of the author. These letters were addressed to the portfolio’s readers, and invited them to explore the work. The teacher’s letter described the goals of the class and commented on the purpose the portfolio served.

(4) Portfolio Entry Pages. These pages were artifacts and samples of student work throughout the semester. Some of these pages were assigned by the instructor while others were determined by the students themselves. The format and content in the entry pages varied; collections of captioned photos, drawings, or samples of student writing were often included.

(5) Student's Reflection Sheets (see example in Appendix A). These notes described the portfolio entry, commented on what the student learned while making this entry, and their feelings towards the work. Students also included any feedback they received from peers or suggestions for revision.

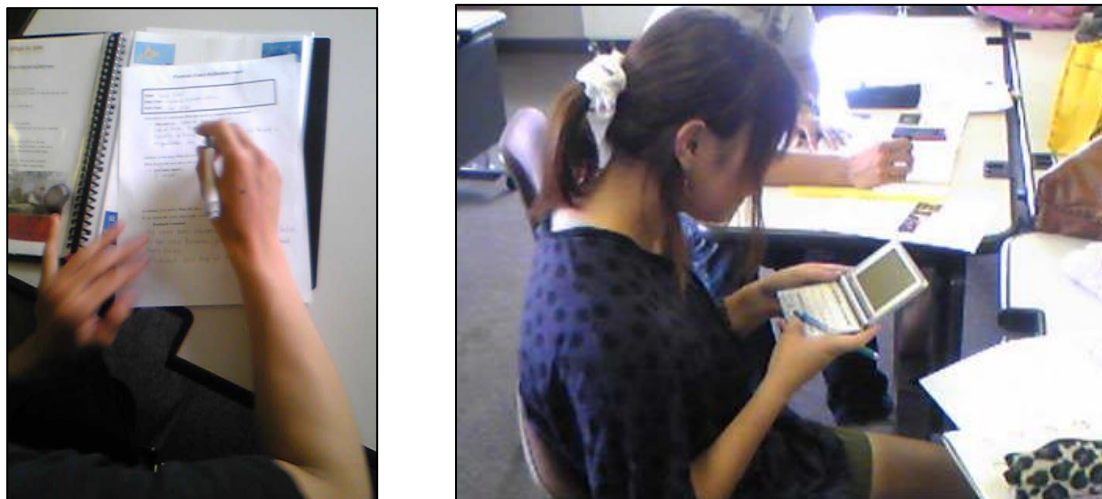


Fig. 1 Students writing reflection sheets. (教室でのライティングの様子)

4. Findings

After a few weeks of sticking to a teacher-guided portfolio process model, homework topics were chosen in a more collaborative, student-centered fashion. The teacher would write a few themes related to the reading topic on the board, students would brainstorm and add their suggestions, and then would democratically narrow the selections down, ultimately choosing the direction they wanted to go. By allowing students the freedom to choose their own homework topics, a higher degree of student interest and motivation was evidenced in the portfolio results. By the end of the semester, portfolio entries noticeably improved in terms of creativity in layout, length of written content, and accuracy of grammar and sentence structure. Students seemed to actually enjoy the process of researching, creating, and sharing the topics they selected.

Portfolios in this case served as a catalyst in getting students involved in their own learning. Although many students were reluctant to speak about their personal experiences and opinions at the beginning of the semester, having a scrapbook of photos, artwork, and written reflections in front of them each week seemed to magically activate their verbal output skills. Over time, students seemed to become more comfortable and candid in talking about their interests and achievements.

Even though some students remained shy during the oral presentations, they improved in several areas, including the ability to think critically. Portfolios gave them an opportunity to provide specific examples to address problems they cared about. In written work and discussion sessions, students improved in extending their answers and sharing their opinions in a deeper way. Their descriptive storytelling became more elaborate and complete. Towards the end of the semester, students seemed better able to see the various sides of issues before them and they were able to reflect on their efforts in meaningful ways. In this way, the use of portfolios in this particular seminar class was a success.



Fig. 2 Students share in small group presentations.
(教室でのプレゼンテーション・グループワークの様子)

5. Conclusion

Admittedly, establishing a smooth sailing portfolio process can be time consuming and logistically challenging. Scheduling and time deadlines are always a factor, and what works for one class may not be suitable for another. Students may not have any experience in creating portfolios and may not fully understand what is expected in terms of effort required and final product. Time must be taken to lay out clear guidelines and expectations. Communicating what a successful portfolio looks like is also vital, and it helps to show students samples of exemplary portfolio entries, videotaped speeches and presentations, and self-reflective writing examples. Only after these steps are fully explained and understood by all, can implementation of a portfolio process begin.

Many teachers might ask themselves if student portfolios are worth the time and hassle. Varvus (1990) believes that portfolios have the potential to create more authentic portraits of what our students learn. She adds that while they do require more time and organization on the teacher's part, the benefits far outweigh the cost.

After witnessing firsthand the positive things that portfolio creation can bring, the improved levels of student participation, motivation and enthusiasm in class, I would concur that the time and effort is indeed worth it. The final product that my students put forth exceeded my expectations as a teacher, and I felt that the portfolios gave me new insights into my student's lives and learning like no other test or assessment tool could. I am now a firm believer in the transformative power of the portfolio.

References

- Broukal, M., & Milhomme, J. (2008). *All About the USA, Book 4* (2nd Ed.). White Plains, NY: Pearson Education.
- Butler, P., & Santos, M. (1997). *Issues in alternative assessment: The Japanese perspective*. Kwansai Gaikun University Language Center, Nishinomiya, Japan. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 408 819).
- Clemmons, J, Laase, L., Cooper, D. Areglado, N., & Dill, M. (1993). *Portfolios in the classroom: A teacher's sourcebook*. New York: Scholastic.
- Gottlieb, M. (1995). Nurturing student learning through portfolios. *TESOL Journal*, 5 (1), pp. 12-14.
- Newman, C., Smolen, L., & Lee, D.J. (1995). *Implementation of portfolios in an ESL classroom*. Paper presented on March 5, 1995 at the Eastern Educational Research Association Conference, Hilton Head, SC. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 384 645).
- Rolheiser, C., Bower, B., & Stevahn, L. (2000). *The portfolio organizer: Succeeding with portfolios in your classroom*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Stiggins, R. J. (2005). *Student-involved assessment for learning* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Varvus, L. (1990). Put portfolios to the test. *Instructor*, pp. 49-52.

(Submitted: August 21, 2011; Accepted: October 11, 2011)

Appendix A: Student Portfolio Entry Reflection Sheet

Portfolio Entry Reflection Sheet

Name:

Entry Title:

Entry Date:

(Description of assignment) What did you do to complete this assignment?

- **This entry is...**

(Analysis of learning) What did you learn by doing this project?

What do you like most about this work?

- **This entry shows...**

(Comments from peers) What did others say about this work?

If you revised this work, what would you change?

- **Feedback I received...**

Appendix B: Examples of Portfolio Topics

(This list contains both student and teacher-suggested portfolio entry ideas. Students chose fifteen of these topics during the semester, one entry each week.)

- Self-Introduction: Who Am I?
- My Travels: Places I Have Been To
- Future Travel: Places I Would Like to Visit Someday
- Holidays & Traditions in America
- My Hobbies and Interests
- My Family & Friends
- An Important Event in U.S. History
- My Favorite Sport: To Play, To Watch, To Follow
- Movies & Television
- My Future Dream
- A Day in My Life: A Photo Gallery
- Pets & Animals
- An American Biography (Walt Disney, Barack Obama, Amelia Earhart, Rosa Parks, etc.)
- Music: All About My Favorite Group or Solo Artist
- Favorite Mottos, Proverbs, and Quotes in English
- A Poem or Haiku I Wrote
- All About My University
- 3 Adjectives That Describe Me
- Something in Life that Makes Me Happy (ala 1000awesomethings.com)
- Time Machine: Where Would You Go?
- The Environment: Issues & Ways to Save the Planet
- Big News in the World This Year
- How I Study English: What Works / Doesn't Work For Me
- Halloween, Monsters, and Scary Things
- Music & Lyrics: Songs that I Like and What the Words Mean
- Food Culture
- Heroes: Fictional and True-Life
- Shopping & Clothing
- An Important Invention
- Good Manners / Bad Manners
- Celebrities
- My Dream Home
- Some Childhood Memories
- Fads & Fashions of the Past
- Art & Artists
- The World in the Future
- Write a Letter to a Friend
- Hokkaido Recommendations: Places to Visit, Eat, and Stay
- How Often Do You...? (Adverbs of Frequency)
- Taboos
- Explaining Culture & Customs from My Country
- Business: A Company or Product I Admire
- Your own idea.....