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Portfolio Grading and the Writing Center

Irene L. Clark

Imagine the following scenario:

It is a pleasant weekday morning, and you are on your way to your office in the writing center. But as you approach the main entrance of the center, you encounter crowds of students congregated in the hallway, all of them attempting to get in. There is a sense of nervous anxiety, even desperation in the air, and students are talking about what number they are. Somehow, you manage to push past the group, and as you enter the writing center, you encounter another crowd of students, equally distraught, clustered around the front desk, some begging and pleading, others looking grim. The phone is ringing off the hook, every available seat is taken, tutors' eyes are glazed, and the receptionist looks as if she is about to freak out. Between phone calls, she manages to mumble that this week the writing center has turned away over one hundred students a day.

This is the scene which occurred in the writing center during the midpoint and final weeks of the Fall 1990 semester at the University of Southern California, when the Freshman Writing Program instituted a system of portfolio grading in place of a holistically scored departmental examination. It is a scene which called attention not only to the effect of portfolio grading on the writing center but also to several pedagogical and ethical issues associated with writing center assistance. Before I discuss these issues, however, I would like to establish that, despite the chaotic scene I described, our program is quite enthusiastic about portfolio evaluation, has

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continued to work with it, and has managed to avoid a repeat performance of the chaos. However, what our initial experience also indicates is that when a program with a strong connection between the writing center and the classroom institutes a system of portfolio evaluation, the writing center is going to be profoundly affected, not only because of increased staffing needs, but also because portfolio grading highlights several persistently problematic writing center issues, in particular:

- Distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate collaboration;
- Focusing tutorial assistance so that students will both improve the texts they are revising and also learn something about writing that they can apply to a subsequent writing task;
- Determining which aspect of the writing process should be emphasized during writing center visits;
- Predicting how writing center visits will affect student grades and how pressure for grades will affect writing center visits.

This essay describes how the adoption of portfolio evaluation focused attention on these problematic writing center issues.

The Writing Program, the Writing Center, and Portfolio Grading

The Freshman Writing Program at USC consists of about one hundred and twenty graduate students from several academic departments on campus who teach the freshman writing course sequence to approximately twenty-five hundred first-year students; a large subset of these graduate students also tutor in the writing center, where they are known as “writing consultants.” The program and the writing center are tightly linked and espouse a consistent pedagogical and theoretical approach to the teaching of writing, one based on process, reading, and social constructionist theories. Because the same graduate students teach in the program as tutor in the writing center, and because the writing center director is a member of the Freshman Writing Program, this coherence in approach can be easily maintained. Thus, because the program and the center are part of the same system, any changes that occur in the program are likely to have a direct impact on the center.

In addition to its endorsement of the theories associated with the writing program, the writing center itself adheres to several principles of tutoring that have become established writing center lore (North 24). Part of this lore is, in Stephen North’s much-quoted phrase, that writing centers aim to produce better writers, not necessarily better texts, that students learn best when they assume responsibility for their own work (Bruner, Weiner), and that too much assistance is not only counterproductive to student learning,

but can result in a form of collaboration that can strain ethical boundaries. Finally, writing center lore maintains that since the writing process is recursive, writing centers should address all phases of that process.

The decision to institute portfolio evaluation was based initially on dissatisfaction among both students and instructors with a department-generated, holistically scored final exam that counted for thirty percent of the student's final grade. The exam had been established in 1979 to validate the writing program within the university and to maintain consistent grading standards among the numerous instructors in the department who, despite significant efforts by the program to provide extensive training and to mandate evaluation requirements, varied considerably in their experience, backgrounds, and policies.

The departmental exam was a "prepared impromptu," which meant that students were given ample time to prepare for the exam in the form of departmentally distributed reading material discussed in class during the last weeks of the semester and through supplementary writing assignments designed to familiarize students with the topic. Nevertheless, although students were quite familiar with the topic of the exam, when they actually had to write the impromptu essay, they still found the system extremely anxiety-provoking and blatantly incompatible with the department's policy which had always stressed the importance of revision and generally had given students opportunities to revise their papers and hence improve their grades. This criticism of the exam was also expressed by many instructors.

In contrast to the problems associated with the final exam, portfolio grading is associated with numerous advantages, in particular its validity (Elbow and Belanoff), its reinforcement of a process approach to composition (Roemer, Schultz, and Durst), and its beneficial effect on assignments, grading standards, and communication among instructors (Smit). Another advantage is that portfolio grading enables the instructor to function more as a coach than as a judge, thus decreasing antagonism between student and classroom instructor (Ford and Larkin). Finally, Burnham claims that portfolio grading "creates independent writers and learners" (136), motivating students to become more responsible for their own work.

Portfolio grading was thus particularly well suited to the philosophy of the program in that it supported the ideas of process, writer-reader transaction, and social construction, all of which constitute the theoretical bases of the program and which are implemented in the writing center. Our decision to institute portfolio grading, then, was based on a clear rationale, and we devoted a great many meetings to deciding just how we would incorporate the new practice within the program.

The Implementation of a Portfolio System

During the first semester in which portfolio grading was implemented in the program (Fall 1990), all students enrolled in freshman writing courses were required to submit samples of their writing for both a midterm and a final portfolio evaluation. The weight of the midterm portfolio grade was left to the discretion of the classroom instructor, but it was recommended that the final portfolio grade should count for thirty per cent of the student's final grade. During departmentally scheduled portfolio grading sessions, each portfolio would be graded by classroom instructors and one other instructor who was given a copy of the assignment but who was otherwise unfamiliar with the student's work. For the midterm portfolio, students enclosed one piece of previously submitted writing which they were free to revise for a midterm grade. The final portfolio consisted of two previously submitted papers, excluding the paper previously submitted for the midterm, papers which students were allowed to revise extensively. Included in the final portfolio was also an impromptu essay written in class which served to determine that the portfolio papers had really been written by the student rather than by a roommate, a friend, or a paper writing service. Another guard against cheating was provided by the classroom instructor who examined the portfolio before submitting it to establish that the work really belonged to the student. During the grading session, any grade discrepancies between a second reader and the classroom instructor were negotiated between them, and, if necessary, settled by a senior instructor who functioned as a sort of group leader. Due to extensive preparation by our director in charge of evaluation, including examination of papers of varying strengths and qualities (similar to the socialization which occurs before holistic exam readings), there were few discrepancies that could not be settled relatively easily.

Part of the reason that the new method of evaluation worked relatively smoothly from the beginning was that we attempted to achieve as much consistency as possible, both in grading and assignment criteria. Before evaluation took place, instructors were socialized to a grading rubric, which defined characteristics for each level of writing. Moreover, because our experience in developing topics for the final exam indicated that the nature of assignments significantly affects both the validity and the reliability of evaluation, the program also mandated the nature of the assignments deemed "portfolio eligible," providing models, criteria and extensive training for both new and returning instructors.

Thus, even before the first portfolio grading session occurred, the adoption of the portfolio system required instructors to devote more attention to the nature of their assignments, an initial benefit which was followed by a general sense of satisfaction with the new method. A preliminary survey indicated that both students and instructors were quite pleased with it, both pedagogically and conceptually. Neither students nor instructors indicated interest in a return to the final exam.

The Effect on the Writing Center

During our planning sessions, we had, of course, foreseen at least some increase in writing center use as a result of portfolio evaluation, and we had, accordingly, warned students repeatedly to schedule appointments well in advance and urged instructors to remind their students to do so. However, as could be predicted, simply alerting students to the anticipated scarcity of writing center appointments during the weeks preceding the grading did not mean that most of them completed their work in advance. Last minute revision, unfortunately, seems to be a given of student life, and although we were not surprised that writing center use had increased, we had not anticipated the extent of it, nor did we have viable solutions for dealing with the overflow of students. At first glance, this situation might be perceived purely as an administrative problem which could be solved by hiring more consultants and expanding the facility. However, aside from the unlikelihood of such a remedy in a time of recession, and even if such expansion were possible, the crush in the writing center raised more fundamental issues than those concerned simply with staffing.

Distinguishing Legitimate From Illegitimate Collaboration

One question which emerged from the chaos was that of defining what we in writing centers mean when we use the word *collaboration* and of distinguishing what has been referred to as “legitimate” from “illegitimate” collaboration. As Andrea Lunsford points out, the word “collaboration” has only recently become a bandwagon term, gathering momentum from a

broad-based epistemological shift . . . in the way we view knowledge. The shift involves a move from viewing knowledge and reality as things exterior to or outside of us, as immediately accessible, individually knowable, measurable, and shareable—to viewing knowledge and reality as mediated by or constructed through language in social use, as socially constructed, contextualized, as, in short, the product of *collaboration*. (4)

But how can this concept of collaborative learning be defined in terms of practical application? A strict interpretation of the concept suggests that true collaboration can occur only when collaborators are part of the same discourse community. As I have noted elsewhere, true colleagues regularly collaborate by discussing their work with one another, assisting one another by suggesting sources, trading drafts, perhaps even polishing style in one another's drafts (Clark "Collaboration," "Maintaining"). This type of what may be termed collegial collaboration aims to assist the author in perceiving conceptual or perhaps stylistic blind spots that are unavoidable for even experienced, competent writers. Moreover, this form of collaboration is constrained by the author's established identity as a writer, as knowledgeable within the field, and it presumes that the author and not the collaborator is entirely responsible for the emerging text.

This sort of collegial collaboration is not usually what we mean, though, when we refer to collaborative learning in the writing center. Collaboration between tutor and student presumes a situation in which the student is not an established member of a discourse community. In fact, often the collaboration is aimed at assisting students in gaining that membership. This goal then implies that tutors cannot freely offer suggestions but instead should refrain from dominating not only the text but also collaborative discussions about the text; in order for learning to take place, all aspects of the writing situation should remain firmly in the hands of the student.

Illegitimate assistance, on the other hand, substantially effaces or overrides the student's own contributions to the text. Such assistance does little to improve a student's abilities as a writer; instead it merely results in a paper which that student could not produce independently. Illegitimate assistance not only fails to help the student's development but also renders the student vulnerable to charges of inadvertent plagiarism.

Writing centers, in particular, have always been sensitive both to the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate collaboration and, all attempts at definition notwithstanding, to the difficulty of determining an absolute boundary between the two. According to what has come to be established writing center lore, legitimate collaboration is primarily directed at developing the student's writing *process* and at improving the student's understanding of how texts operate in terms of their readers and the expectations of an appropriate discourse community. With this aim in mind, tutors can, for instructional purposes, make or suggest changes in a text; however, they must make sure that the student's own contributions remain predominant. If one views a writing center conference in terms of its

pedagogical goals, the improvement of any particular text may be considered of minor importance compared to how discussions of that text enhance student writing ability. But from the students' perspective, improvement of the text and the achievement of a better grade are of primary, if not paramount, importance, especially when students are revising a paper for portfolio grading. Thus, the pre-portfolio rush in the writing center had the effect of exacerbating an existing and inherent conflict of interest between consultants and students, calling attention to the often blurry distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate collaboration.

The Effect on Process Pedagogy in the Writing Center

Aware of this conflict, writing center training has traditionally focused on the importance of working with process and on the problem of assuming too much responsibility for either the conference or the text. Therefore, there was considerable concern in our writing center when we realized that, because of portfolio grading, some students were bringing in the same paper to confer with many different consultants, getting as much feedback as possible. Some of the more ambitious non-native speakers came in several times a day, working with however many consultants they could manage to get appointments with. They would sit beside the front desk waiting patiently for an alternate slot, and if someone didn't show up, they were right there to take the appointment. Moreover, with the pressure and the crowds, the receptionist had difficulty keeping track of who had come in and when. Thus, although consultants strongly resisted providing what could have been labeled "illegitimate assistance" and although none of them "appropriated" or rewrote a student's text, at least some of the papers which had been repeatedly revised may have reflected disproportionate consultant input.

The pre-portfolio crushes, then, raised the issue of whether such extensive writing center assistance was likely to result in significant improvement in student writing ability, an issue which is, indeed, quite difficult to resolve. One position on this question is that, although some of the papers may not have reflected the students' "true" writing abilities, the students were, nevertheless, learning a great deal simply because they were focusing so intensively on the revision process. In accord with this line of thinking, Knoblauch and Brannon point out that "*symptoms of growth* [my italics]—the willingness to take risks, to profit from advice, to make recommendations to others—may appear quickly, even if improved performance takes longer" (169), a view which suggests that the activities students engaged in during repeated writing center visits may indeed have resulted in increased student writing ability, even if such improvement could not be measured immedi-

ately. Nevertheless, despite this possibility and although composition research strongly suggests the value of revision, no study has ever indicated that revising the same paper over and over again is usually of significant benefit for the writer.

Moreover, whether or not such extensive writing center visits ultimately proved to be of benefit to student writing ability, the question of how to assign grades to the resulting portfolios raised significant ethical concerns. Historically, writing center assistance has been viewed suspiciously by colleagues who are unfamiliar with collaborative learning in any form and who do not themselves teach or tutor writing. Thus, we were concerned that portfolio grading was rendering the writing center vulnerable to accusations of plagiarism.

Determining Which Aspect of Writing Should Be Addressed

In addition to these ethical questions, portfolio evaluation also raised questions about what aspect of the writing process should be emphasized during writing center conferences. Writing center conferences are generally recognized as being particularly useful for prewriting; even when students bring in a presumably completed draft, additional prewriting or brainstorming is likely to take place. However, what seemed to be happening during the midterm and final pre-portfolio writing center crushes was that students were using the writing center to optimize an already existing text rather than to use that text as a starting point for an additional, more developed or coherent text. This overemphasis on revision could thus be interpreted as a limit on the role of the writing center in working with student texts at all stages of the writing process, a phenomenon that had not occurred as a result of the final exam. In fact, in preparation for the exam, instructors had often assigned “practice” exam topics during the last two weeks of the semester in order to familiarize students with the topic, and students had then come to the writing center with assignments for which they had to develop ideas. The exam, then, had provided students with opportunities to practice prewriting strategies in the writing center, while the portfolio system was focusing student attention primarily on revision.

Assessing Instructor Opinion Through Surveys

In order to determine how the new evaluation system was being received by the instructors in the writing program, we conducted two surveys, one at the end of the spring 1991 semester and the other at the end of the fall 1991 semester. Overall response to these surveys serves as a general endorsement

of portfolio evaluation; nevertheless, several responses also indicate that portfolio evaluation does, indeed, have a problematic impact on the writing center (both the survey and the results are included in the appendix).

In general, the results of the survey indicated that most instructors (89.9% and 94.6%) felt that portfolio evaluation did, indeed, provide a valid assessment of student writing abilities. There was also strong agreement on question 2 (the effect of portfolio grading on process pedagogy), on questions 3 and 5 (the effect on revision both in the classroom and in the writing center), and on question 7 (the effect on using the writing center for revision).

However, what is of particular note were the responses to questions 4 and 6 which are concerned with the effect of portfolio grading on invention both in the writing center and in the classroom. In the first survey, responding to question 4, only 42.9% felt that portfolio grading motivated classroom emphasis on invention, and only 29.1% responded affirmatively in the second survey. Responding to question 6, which queried instructors about how portfolio grading impacted the writing center in terms of invention, only 45.3% in the first survey and 42.3% in the second answered affirmatively. Thus, although the program had been aware of this tendency after the first survey and had strongly emphasized invention in subsequent training sessions, instructors continued to view portfolio evaluation as not contributing significantly to the development of invention strategies either in the classroom or in the writing center.

What is also worth noting is the response in both surveys to question 8: Students are using the writing center so frequently that the papers they prepare for their portfolios do not accurately reflect their true writing abilities. Despite our concern that writing center assistance was being abused, a total of 81.6% in the first survey and 70.5% in the second survey *disagreed* with this statement. However, of particular significance is that those who *agreed* with that statement were more likely to have worked in the writing center than those who had not. In the first survey, 22.58% of people who worked in the writing center agreed as opposed to only 5.38% who had not. In the second survey, 14.44% of people who worked in the writing center agreed with that statement while only 3.33% who had not did. Apparently, those instructors who had not worked in the writing center were less concerned that writing center use makes student writers appear to have more ability than they actually do than instructors who had. One explanation for this response is that because a small percentage of students were frequent users of the writing center, getting assistance with every paper and draft, perhaps consultants perceived that these students were receiving

assistance beyond what might be deemed pedagogically acceptable. Those instructors who worked in the writing center may have felt that their “regular customers” had had a slight advantage over non-users.

Administrative Changes

After the first semester, several changes in both program and writing center policy were instituted for the 1991-92 semesters. To alleviate the crush at mid-semester, we changed the midterm evaluation to a “midterm diagnostic reading,” meaning that at midterm, students receive diagnosis but no grades. At the midterm portfolio reading, instructors analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the second and third papers and suggest some particular areas each student might wish to concentrate on during the remainder of the semester, but no grades which “count” are placed on the portfolio. This deemphasis on grades has taken the pressure generated by portfolio grading off the writing center at midterm because students’ priorities being what they are, fewer students crowd the writing center to revise their papers if they are not going to receive grades.

Our reexamination of the role of grade pressure on writing center attendance also resulted in a policy decision to limit appointments to one a day during the weeks preceding portfolio grading, although during other times students are free to come as often as they can. The rationale for this rule is that if students come to the writing center frequently, they are more likely to learn strategies that can be applied to a subsequent writing task and will, therefore, be improving their writing abilities. Then, at the end of the semester, they will presumably be able to revise their portfolios on their own.

Portfolio evaluation is rapidly becoming the method of choice in many composition programs, and the literature continues to extol its many virtues. However, what is often overlooked in the initial enthusiasm is that any change in a system as complex as a writing program is likely to be disruptive, “introducing ambiguities, revealing complexities, setting new tasks, forcing risks” (Phelps 883), and that, as Roemer, Schultz and Durst point out, the implementation of portfolio assessment often results in “more sweeping change than may be apparent at the outset” (456). We at USC are still strongly in favor of portfolio evaluation and are continuing to work out the kinks in our adaptation of it, but it has indeed generated creative confusion in the writing center.

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Portfolio Evaluation Survey

Did you work in the Writing Center this semester? yes_____ no_____

1. Portfolio evaluation provides a valid method of assessing students' writing abilities.
strongly disagree_____ disagree_____ agree_____ strongly agree_____
2. Portfolio evaluation accurately reflects process pedagogy.
strongly disagree_____ disagree_____ agree_____ strongly agree_____
3. Portfolio evaluation generates a strong classroom emphasis on revision.
strongly disagree_____ disagree_____ agree_____ strongly agree_____
4. Portfolio evaluation generates a strong classroom emphasis on invention.
strongly disagree_____ disagree_____ agree_____ strongly agree_____
5. Portfolio evaluation motivates students to use the Writing Center more frequently.
strongly disagree_____ disagree_____ agree_____ strongly agree_____
6. Portfolio evaluation motivates students to use the Writing Center for help with invention, prewriting, and drafting.
strongly disagree_____ disagree_____ agree_____ strongly agree_____
7. Portfolio evaluation motivates students to use the Writing Center for help in revision for portfolios.
strongly disagree_____ disagree_____ agree_____ strongly agree_____
8. Students are using the Writing Center so frequently that the papers they prepare for their portfolios do not accurately reflect their true writing abilities.
strongly disagree_____ disagree_____ agree_____ strongly agree_____

Remarks:

PORTFOLIO RESULTS: TWO SURVEYS

| | SURVEY #1 | | SURVEY #2 | |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | %Agree | %Disagree | %Agree | %Disagree |
| 1. Validity | 89.9 | 10.1 | 94.6 | 5.4 |
| 2. Reflects process pedagogy | 68.2 | 31.8 | 67.4 | 32.6 |
| 3. Generates class emphasis on revision | 85.4 | 14.6 | 78.2 | 20.7 |
| 4. Generates class emphasis on invention | 42.9 | 57.2 | 29.1 | 71.0 |
| 5. Motivates frequent writing center use | 72.7 | 27.3 | 71.7 | 28.2 |
| 6. Motivates writing center use for invention | 45.3 | 54.6 | 42.3 | 57.6 |
| 7. Motivates writing center use for revision | 86.3 | 12.5 | 83.7 | 16.3 |
| 8. Due to extensive writing center use, portfolios do not reflect “true” student | 18.3 | 81.6 | 29.5 | 70.5 |

SURVEY #1

SPRING 1991

N=88

Question #8: Students are using the Writing Center so frequently that the papers they prepare for their portfolios do not accurately reflect their true writing abilities.

Did not work in WC Worked in WC

| | | | |
|------------------|-------------|-------|-------|
| Disagreed | # of tutors | 23 | 39 |
| | % of total | 24.73 | 41.93 |
| Agreed | # of tutors | 5 | 21 |
| | % of total | 5.38 | 22.58 |

SURVEY #2

FALL 91

N=87

Did not work in WC Worked in WC

| | | | |
|------------------|-------------|-------|-------|
| Disagreed | # of tutors | 30 | 41 |
| | % of total | 33.33 | 45.55 |
| Agreed | # of tutors | 3 | 13 |
| | % of total | 3.33 | 14.44 |