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Finding Consistency and Speculating Change: What We Can Learn About Portfolio Assessment from the Writing Center[1]

Sheryl I. Fontaine

Faced with competing and sometimes conflicting theories about the cognitive, expressive, and social nature of writing, writing center faculty have recently called into question the sufficiency of *any* single theory to drive or describe writing center practice. Some writers have proposed, instead, that we draw on several lines of research to explain and support the work of the writing center (Ede; Hobson). While we may not immediately agree on which theories to use, the advantage of creating a system of theories to support writing center practice is twofold: we acknowledge the theoretical complexity of the field; and, more significantly, by specially integrating various theories, we define the distinct position that writing centers hold, one that, according to Lisa Ede, is "at the heart, rather than the periphery, of current theory in composition studies" (5-6). Instead of letting writing centers rest "on the periphery of [their] own field of composition studies" (7) and in the shadow of the classroom, we would recognize writing centers as primary scenes for practice to embody theory and would acknowledge writing center practices as enactments of theories and principles that have evolved *within* the writing center. Thomas Hemmeter extends this position, explaining that the writing center is neither ancillary nor supplementary to the classroom (37), and that we must "recognize in classroom practices traces of writing center instruction" (43).

I would like to accept Hemmeter's charge as it regards the currently popular and frequently-discussed classroom practice of portfolio assessment, demonstrating how fairly distinctive and long-standing writing center philosophy and practice are reflected in this form of writing assessment. Beyond

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grounding writing centers more solidly in the evolution of our discipline, the more immediate value of demonstrating their consistency with portfolio assessment is that I can then distinguish in writing center conversations clues for refining and improving our use of portfolios.

The writing center to which I refer here is not any one in particular, but an ideal one constructed from my own experiences as tutor and administrator and from philosophical tenets and practices that emerge from the works of Bruffee, B. Clark, I. Clark, Harris, North, Reigstad and McAndrew, Meyer and Smith, and others. Similarly, I have constructed my idea of portfolio assessment from personal experiences and from reading practitioners like Elbow and Belanoff, Belanoff and Dickson, Black et al. Though portfolio assessment is necessarily adjusted to conditions of individual writing programs and instructors, it is characteristically an assessment based on a collection of students' self-selected, revised pieces of writing. Occasionally, portfolio readers are students' own instructors, but preferably, they are instructors who work together but do not know the students whose portfolios they read.

The claim that the process of collecting and assessing students' writing portfolios is consistent with the most central principles of writing center philosophy may initially seem self-evident. By changing the final measure of writing from a time-constrained, unrevised essay or the judgment of an individual reader, surely portfolios reinforce the value that writing centers place on the process of drafting, revising, listening, and responding (e.g., Greenberg; Leahy). But, as I will demonstrate, the handful of articles on the subject have offered little recognition for either this support or, more importantly, for the agency writing centers may have in shaping portfolio assessment.

For the most part, current essays portray writing centers as passive agents to be affected by this new form of assessment, raising suspicions about the negative impact they may have. Nadene A. Keene, for example, warns us that "the Writing Center constituencies . . . will be most directly affected by the adoption of this new assessment procedure" (217); "the *instigation* of portfolio evaluation means both a continuation and an extension of services already being provided, of skills already being used" (219, emphasis added). Ultimately, Keene means to reassure writing center directors that while portfolio assessment will create "potential problems," it will not threaten the philosophical or physical space of the writing center nor will it lead to "the demise of peer-response by trained tutors" (225).

Irene Clark outlines an even more negative series of effects that portfolio assessment has had on the writing center she directs. She asserts that the portfolio exacerbated "an existing and inherent conflict of interest between [tutors] and students, calling attention to the often blurry distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate collaboration" ("Portfolio Grading"

54)—a conflict between leaving students in control of their writing and "overriding" their contributions. Clark's second concern is related to the first, that "portfolio grading [at her institution] was rendering the writing center vulnerable to accusations of plagiarism" (55), of tutors assuming more responsibility for students' texts than is right. Finally, Clark warns us that by emphasizing revision for the sake of completing a portfolio, instructors risked "focusing student attention primarily on revision" rather than on invention or drafting (55).

Clark is most interested in the impact that portfolio assessment has had on her center and its policies. The portfolio, created and controlled from outside the writing center, serves as an agent affecting reaction and change, not only "generat[ing] creative confusion" (57) in the center but, *"undermining long-held beliefs, introducing ambiguities, revealing complexities, setting new tasks, forcing risks"* ("Portfolio Evaluation" 515, emphasis in original). Although some changes occurred in the portfolio system at Clark's school, they were apparently a response to instructors', not the writing center staff's, criticisms. In addition to the control exerted by the instructors in her own program, there is also that of the discipline-at-large: "portfolio evaluation is rapidly becoming the method of choice in many composition programs, and the literature continues to extol its many virtues" ("Portfolio Grading" 57). Such endorsement places portfolio assessment beyond the reach of any dissatisfaction felt by writing center staff.

I don't mean to minimize the very real problems that portfolio assessment has created for Keene's or Clark's writing centers—or for my own or other writing centers across the country. Rather, I wish to demonstrate the limitations we create by placing writing centers in the position of outsider or victim. Discussions that regard portfolio assessment as an externally generated "innovation" that writing centers must contend with and are helpless to change privilege the writing classroom over the writing center, ignoring not only the positive effects of portfolio assessment, but, more importantly, ignoring the valuable role writing centers may have played in establishing and driving the philosophy that underlies this assessment practice and the role they could have in refining the practice. In such discussions, portfolio assessment controls what happens in the center—increasing tutors' workload, students' inclination to request proofreading, or the generally-felt need for centers—and is experienced as yet another set of external requirements for which writing center faculty will anticipate repercussions and make necessary accommodations.

But if we assume another perspective, that writing centers—quite distinct from writing classrooms—are primary scenes where practice embodies our most current theory, then instead of anticipating the impact of portfolio assessment on writing centers, we can first recognize how the writing center's philosophy is consistent with that of portfolio assessment

and then speculate about how writing centers may contribute to the future use of portfolios.

Keene and Clark allude to the consistency between the writing center and portfolio assessment. For instance, Keene says that Lisa Ede's recent article "describes a philosophy of Writing Centers that closely aligns with the underlying philosophy of portfolio evaluation" (225). Similarly, Clark says that "[p]ortfolio grading was . . . particularly well suited to the philosophy of the [writing] 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 which are implemented in the writing center" ("Portfolio Grading" 50). But ultimately, both writers are most interested in the negative impact of portfolios on the center, on presenting portfolios as the active agent and writing centers as the passive object that must adapt and change.[2]

If, as I have suggested, we redirect our focus, assuming the capacity of the writing center to affect change, we can see reflected in the recently developed process of portfolio assessment a philosophy of writing instruction consistent with that which has been evoked in writing centers for some time. To illustrate this perspective that others have overlooked, let me outline some of the most distinctive features of writing center philosophy and practice, setting them alongside similar features characteristic of the process of portfolio assessment. While I expect that my descriptions of writing centers will sound familiar, their renewed value emerges when we find similar practices and philosophical assumptions supporting this relatively new form of writing assessment.

Like the writing center where tutors are most interested in changing writers and their processes, "[t]he semester long process of creating a writing portfolio moves students beyond making mere surface changes to affecting the way they think about and produce writing" (Crouch and Fontaine 2). And also like the writing center, where the essence of tutoring is to create a real and complex rhetorical context in which student writers talk about, reflect on, and engage in composing,

> [p]ortfolio assessment promotes the belief that good writing takes time . . . includes thinking and planning, rethinking and revising, . . . [that it] benefits from the writer talking and sharing, listening and responding . . . [and] is the result of the writer's acting on successful intuition and decisions and taking responsibility for the writing. (2)

The most routine writing center practice of reading and responding to successive drafts of students' essays is essential to the practice of portfolio assessment. A tutor's commonly accepted responsibility is to be a reader, providing formative response to students' writing and helping them post-

pone the final revision. Those students who, over the course of a semester, create a writing portfolio of their best, revised essays to indicate their degree of success in the course will have the opportunity to delay completion of the final product. In the writing center and now in the writing classroom, students have the luxury of working through a piece of writing several times, realizing that they will not be judged on every piece of writing they produce. "First responses, although valid, need not be the final ones" (Elbow and Belanoff 44); some of these responses will be rewritten numerous times before they are final, while others are dead ends, never to be revised at all.

In the writing center tutors play the role of readers, asking questions that lead to revision. Such things as spelling, usage, and grammar are valued for the degree to which they aid or impede readers' understanding of writers' meaning. Student writers come to understand the consequences of a poorly organized essay or poorly structured sentence in terms of the reader's experience. With portfolio assessment, instructors' responses work similarly, creating a readerly experience from which decisions to pass or fail a portfolio will emerge. By trying to predict how the anonymous portfolio reader might read their essays, might become confused or be misled, students come to be their own readers, to understand the process of drafting and revising that will improve the reader's understanding of their writing and, in turn, strengthen their portfolio.

Writing about portfolio assessment, Peter Elbow argues that "students don't improve much until they experience writing as an effort to communicate and . . . what holds so many students back is that they experience writing as an exercise only in being evaluated" ("Virtues" 52). There may be several ways students are reminded of the communicative purpose of writing as they select and revise essays for their portfolios. But seeing a tutor pause or struggle over a misspelled word or an incorrect sentence construction, a writer, who is now likely to project a similarly confused expression onto the faceless image of the portfolio reader, is most certainly going to reflect on what happens when writing does not communicate its meaning. "Correctness," as it is understood in the writing center, is an integral element of communication, one on which the success of a portfolio may now depend.

Portfolio assessment both supports and enlarges the complex social context for writing that the writing center has always honored, drawing portfolio readers into the circle with tutors, instructors, and classmates. The portfolio reading presents students with a situation much like what they experience when they come to the writing center for their first tutorial: a stranger, someone more expert than they but someone other than their instructor, will be reading their essays. Both situations usually prove to be frightening and frustrating for students. Few of them have had readers other than family, friends, or teachers. But as the writing center emphasizes, and portfolio assessment confirms, writers must often be prepared to meet the

needs and expectations of audiences with whom they have no previous or current history; they "usually write for more than one reader and often for readers who do not know [them]" (Elbow and Belanoff 15). Students commonly shrug off tutors' textual queries with a conspiratorial, "Well, you know." But readers who know nothing more about the writer or the writing task than what is provided in the text *don't* know. And once student writers recognize their readers' viewpoints, perhaps they will solve what they perceive to be the mystery of the tutor's or the portfolio reader's response.

Fundamental to what happens in the writing center is writers' own sense of responsibility and control. Tutors know that if they are to affect the way students write, they must affect the way students feel about themselves as writers. Similarly, portfolio assessment seeks to strengthen writers' self-concept and self-confidence. Because the portfolio is not assembled until the end of the semester, students can—and commonly do—draft more essays than are required for the portfolio. Along the way, they have to make choices about what drafts are worth revising, which ones should be shelved, and which ones will best represent them in the portfolio. Ultimately, they are required to make the kinds of rhetorical choices that all writers must, the kinds of choices that tutors are continually handing back to them.

Perhaps the most significant way that portfolio assessment is consistent with writing center practice is with the attempt each one makes to assimilate writing strategies into the overall understanding and personal writing habits of writers. That is, rather than merely creating for them a file cabinet of first-aid equipment for repairing particular pieces of writing, both the writing center and the writing portfolio seek to integrate all levels of writing strategies—from freewriting and brainstorming to editing and proofreading—into the individual and social context from which each person writes.

First, consider the writing center where tutors integrate their tutoring strategies into a whole view of writing, drawing on their measured responses to writers rather than simply making a reflex response to yet another tutorial. Introducing students to freewriting or proofreading strategies does not happen as a matter of course in all tutorials. Rather, such tutoring strategies emerge in the context of a particular student's process of generating a body of texts (revised and unrevised, complete and incomplete) over the course of her "writing life."

Now consider how portfolio assessment promotes a similar concern with integrating writing strategies and writing assignments into students' evolving understanding of how writing is generated, read, revised, and evaluated. Through the course of drafting and redrafting essays; receiving reader response from instructors, peers, and tutors; making selections for the portfolio; and anticipating portfolio readers' responses, students will have experienced instruction that allows their understanding of writing to grow from their own experience as writers.

In the course of demonstrating the philosophical and practical consistency between the writing center and the process of portfolio assessment, I have also authorized a valuable source of information. Rather than adjusting writing center practice and policy to accommodate the effects of portfolio assessment, we might now ask how warning flags raised in the writing center could signal needed adjustments in the use of portfolios, how potential dangers with portfolio assessment might be minimized with the help of what we can learn from the writing center, and how on-going debates about portfolio assessment might be informed by existing writing center practices.

Recall Clark's concern that because of portfolio assessment students who come to the writing center may focus too much of their own and their tutors' attention on revision rather than drafting or planning. Now consider this very real concern not as a problem for which we must necessarily alter writing center practice, but as a warning signal about portfolio assessment that warrants instructors' attention and adjustments in the system. Is there something about the way portfolio assignments are introduced, paced, or selected that may be affecting students' attitudes about writing in unexpected ways and, in turn, manifesting itself in writing center behaviors? Elbow describes a danger that "[p]ortfolios permit the smell and the feel of evaluation to permeate every crevice of a course" ("Virtues" 50). Stressing its value as summative assessment, teachers may make the portfolio a centerpiece of their course, evaluating every piece of writing according to final portfolio standards. And students, regularly reminded of the final portfolio, write only with its completion in mind, unwilling to take the time necessary for informal, exploratory writing, for multiple drafting or leisurely revising.

The writing center's attention to responding to rather than evaluating writing can help students stretch out the composing process, keeping the final revision at bay as long as possible. And when Elbow claims that "the vital factor for improvement [of student writing]" is not lots of assessment but "the experience of having serious readers genuinely engage with their writing" (52), he could easily be describing the conversations that define the writing center, conversations that provide models for the classroom.

Another warning issued from the writing center about portfolio assessment is that students, worried about "passing" the portfolio, may encourage tutors toward "illegitimate collaboration," letting them assume more responsibility for the writing than they should (Clark, "Portfolio Grading" 54). On their own, those who administer portfolio assessment in composition programs have expressed a similar concern, noting that portfolio assessment "exaggerates the tendency among instructors to efface student authors and appropriate texts" (Schuster 317). But tutors have known the temptations of illegitimate collaboration since long before portfolio assessment came along. Writers, eager for the "right" answers, commonly ask, "What do *you* think I should do?" and push their paper and pen across the table to their

tutors. Perhaps by sharing what they have learned about how to avoid this problem (e.g., B. Clark; Meyer and Smith; North; Reigstad and McAndrew), writing center faculty could advise members of composition programs who are "devoting considerable attention now to theories of commenting and exploring options like minimal marking and marginal interrogation . . . and [who] have asked instructors to refrain from extensive editing and improving of student writing" (Shuster 318)—practices and acts of restraint that have been part of writing centers for some time.

Finally, let me offer an example of how one ongoing debate about portfolio assessment might be informed by writing center experiences and practices. Specialists disagree about the extent to which we can expect reader reliability in portfolio assessment. One side maintains that "[w]hen a portfolio increases validity by giving us a better picture of what we are trying to measure (the student's actual ability), it tends by that very act to muddy reliability—to diminish the likelihood of agreement among readers or graders" (Elbow, "Preface" xii). The other side argues that "this is a false dichotomy," that "no measure . . . can be more valid than it is reliable, that reliability is the upper limit of validity" (White 36).

Like the temptations of illegitimate collaboration, conflicts about the judged quality of essays and the reliability of tutors' readings are well-known in the writing center. Over the course of drafting an essay, a student has tutorials with different tutors and receives conflicting responses: the section of the essay that confused one tutor seemed fluid and clear to another. Or a student receives a low grade on an essay whose draft she had brought to the center for response. Apparently the teacher found the student's voice sarcastic and offensive; the tutor had been amused by the writer's wit. Rather than focusing on which reader is "right" in cases such as these (though certainly the teacher in the second case has the advantage of institutional power), the concern for writing center faculty, as it is for those involved in portfolio assessment, is whether and how we can *have* inter-reader or inter-tutor reliability and what shapes it might take.

In answering this question for portfolio assessment, Peter Elbow and Ed White have offered very different responses. Elbow proposes that since data indicate that readers disagree most about middle-range portfolios, agreeing acceptably well on the high- and low-range ones, we should give "two holistic scores: EXCELLENT and POOR-UNSATISFACTORY" ("Virtues" 49). Elbow himself has been experimenting with a variation on this system, "giving students a holistic or quantitative mark when their papers or portfolios seem to [him] particularly strong or particularly weak and giving other students nothing but [his] comment. . . . Students know that if the news is particularly bad or particularly good, they will hear. If they don't hear, they can listen to [his] mixed comments and pay attention with less anxiety about 'What is my grade? What is my grade?'" (50). White, on the other hand,

argues that single number reliability is possible if instructors make the necessary sacrifices, giving up their readerly idiosyncrasies and engaging in collegial calibration sessions (37). Where the first solution is based on adjusting the notion of reliability to the way readers read and respond to certain kinds of texts, the second insists on the possibility of reliable, single-score holistic readings if readers will adjust to one another and to one group-judgment.

Writing centers, faced with the problems of inter-reader reliability among tutors, have, in essence, practiced both solutions. Students who bring in drafts that are very weak or very strong tend to leave their tutorials knowing as much, knowing what is confusing and what is clear. Middle-range essays, the ones tutors and instructors tend to disagree over, elicit lots of questions and qualifications from tutors. In the center, this practice is more of a natural response to a difficult rhetorical situation than the conscious pedagogical strategy that Elbow describes. In the larger sense, this practice creates a form of inter-reader reliability similar to Elbow's: all the readers agree that the piece of writing is either in the high/low or the mid-range.

As for the second solution to questions of reliability—the use of collegial calibration meetings—it seems that writing center tutors continually experience such meetings. Though tutors do not assess a piece of writing in quite the same way portfolio readers do, they are, nonetheless, making judgments about its effectiveness. Over time, at formal staff meetings, where sample essays are discussed; in tutor lounges, where real tutoring experiences are shared; and in actual tutorials, where a second tutor is called in for advice; writing center faculty share these judgments, coming to general consensus, calibrating their reading of the essays that students from their particular university bring to the writing center. Through the course of many discussions and arguments, tutors find themselves slowly adjusting their judgments against those of their colleagues, possibly giving up, but at least modifying their own readerly idiosyncrasies.[3]

I am certainly not going to attempt to resolve the debate about inter-reader reliability in portfolio assessment. Rather, I suggest that writing center faculty's experiences with similar issues might help to move debates forward and to anticipate the strengths and weaknesses of offered solutions. It seems worth noting, for instance, that writing center practice seemingly incorporates two of the solutions that have appeared in the literature on portfolio assessment: recognizing the likelihood of having two kinds of scores or responses but at the same time encouraging discussions that seem to support the possibility of single, agreed upon reading of texts.

However, in the course of developing these solutions, writing center practice has also had to respond and adapt to the problems each creates. Although tutors may naturally respond differently to the high/low and mid-range essays, students aren't necessarily as accepting of this difference as Elbow seems to have found in his classroom. In the writing center, the mid-

range writers are eager for the dogmatic response that they perceive high/low writers to be receiving. What Elbow has described and what tutors do may be closest to a real, readerly response and may be reliable because it does "demonstrate what [they] can really do" (Cooper xi) by demonstrating to the writer what kind of reader responses their writing really elicits. But this kind of reliability conflicts with the definition of reliability that students imagine, one in which tutors carry in their heads a template of A, B, C, and D essays against which they match students' essays and make unwavering judgments. While Elbow's students are willing to listen to his mixed comments in a way that makes them less anxious about their grades, the resistance to such commentary in the writing center should not be overlooked. If programs using writing portfolios were to try Elbow's suggestion, would they be met with the same resistance? How should they prepare instructors, curricula, and assessment practices to meet it?

Now consider how writing center practice integrates the suggestion that we conduct collegial calibration sessions to achieve inter-reader reliability. By letting calibration and consensus happen over time, writing centers make less sudden the "sacrifices" that White claims readers must make, as tutors are given the opportunity to come to agreement rather than required to sacrifice immediately their reading for another that is imposed on them. A similar adjustment in calibration sessions would seem appropriate for portfolio assessment, particularly if we consider Pat Belanoff's assertion that "[p]ortfolio assessment brings people together to create a literate environment." Perhaps portfolio readers, like writing center tutors, should take advantage of the *creation* of this environment, letting reading rubrics against which they calibrate themselves emerge from the environment of teachers, tutors, and student writers.

Finally, I cannot argue that writing center philosophy and practice have directly influenced the development of portfolio assessment—I'm not even sure how such an influence would be measured. Rather, seeing how demonstrably consistent the idea of the writing center is with the theory and process of portfolio assessment, I am persuaded that its presence in journal articles, conference discussions, and, for many of us, in the jobs we have held in the last ten or so years, contributed to the intellectual environment from which portfolio assessment grew. Seeing it in this way, we acknowledge how the writing center reaches beyond itself, contributing to the atmosphere in which contemporary theory and pedagogy evolve and then providing support for practices like portfolio assessment. What we learn about portfolio assessment from writing centers is only one example of how writing centers can be used to inform and extend our conversations on the teaching of writing. Writing centers need not consider themselves passive objects or victims of others' actions. The same history that accounts for such feelings of victimization documents the existence of a philosophy whose reflection we see in the evolution of our discipline.

Notes

[1]The author would like to acknowledge Pat Belanoff, Richard Boyd, and Susan Hunter for their response and advice.

[2]From the point of view of teachers using portfolios, a few have recognized the value of the writing center as a place for students to prepare or store their portfolios (e.g., Hileman and Case; Holt and Baker). But none of these writers has yet looked beyond the practical assistance that writing centers provide.

[3]The results of this kind of calibration were powerfully illustrated for the tutors in the writing center I coordinate when several of them attended the National Writing Center Conference. Hearing tutors from around the country discuss sample essays and tutorials, tutors from my school were frequently surprised at how much their readings of particular essays contrasted with the readings offered by tutors from other schools.

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