

Fostering Metacognition as Differentiation: Keeping Student Portfolios

Background and Theory

As a teacher in a 21st Century-aligned school, I teach my students the value of metacognition through setting goals, referring to those goals, acknowledging challenges, and celebrating successes. I also teach my students *how* to identify such goals, challenges, and successes through ongoing digital portfolio keeping and reflection via a series of self-assessments at each quarter point during the year. I have found that students notice how memorable and meaningful such forms of self-assessment can be, and I have found the self-assessments and quarterly portfolios to be useful references for ongoing conversations with students and parents and general formative assessments in the forms of parent-teacher conferences, student-teacher conferences, and anecdotal report cards. And most importantly, I have found portfolio keeping a method for radical differentiation in offering students standards based feedback: while I grade students based on grade-level standards, I give students the opportunity to set academic goals, articulate and reflect on their achievement or near achievement, and perform reflectively and reflexively in their final presentations—their “published,” finalized portfolios.

As the portfolio's prime focus (as I implement it) is primarily on semester- and year-end *student* self-assessment, my “teacher” orientation is one of guidance, feedback, and assessment, ultimately. In other words, I don't keep a formal *teacher* portfolio, though I do draw on a formative portfolios for conferences, print the mid-year portfolio for spring conferences, and respond to the final portfolio in my final grade comments (the final “anecdotal”).

I follow [Portfolio Keeping](#) both in theory and practice (if there's one book I recommend using, it's this one--though it's written for college composition, the concept is easily adaptable for high school.) Authors Reynolds and Davis demonstrate that the key components for portfolio writing are choice, variety, and reflection—and in selecting assignments to highlight for their final portfolios, students are afforded choice, demonstrate variety of performance (as well as challenges in learning), and offer comprehensive reflection in which they discuss goals realized and unrealized—in the form of skill-sets.

In what follows, I offer a model for regularly maintained and focused digital self-assessment distribution, portfolio assignments as semester formalized self-assessments, and student samples and rubrics for the portfolios.

Regular Self-Assessment

To set the tone for the formal portfolio publications at the semester points—and to build writing around goals, challenges, and successes, students reflect periodically by way of informal, digital self-assessments by way of Google Forms.

The following self-assessments regarding reading, writing, and student practices structure the course:

- Day One Self-Assessment (setting goals for the year as readers, writers, and students)
- Submission of and reflection on a work from last year's English class (what are you proud of? How does this work demonstrate your capacity as a reader, writer, and student?)
- First Quarter Self-Assessment (focus on reading skill, writing skill, successful lesson, mastery goal—see below for more)
- Second Quarter Self-Assessment
- Third Quarter Self-Assessment
- Final Self-Assessment

As a sampling, the first quarter self-assessment asks the following questions, and a variation of such a self-assessment is offered throughout the year:

- Share one lesson or activity that you have enjoyed or of which you are proud.
- Share one skill that you have learned.
- Share one activity that you would like to do (or do more of).
- Share one skill that you would like to master.

Portfolio Building Cover Letters

Ideally, students are building a language in their self-assessments that they then can translate into the form of comprehensive cover letters to present written work, in various categories, that demonstrates their performance as readers, writers, and students. And ideally, in my iPad classroom, all student work is digital and in the “cloud”—so students can always reference their writing, my comments, and their revisions, thus engaging in the process of writing and in the process of self-improvement and self-reflection.

Essentially, there are two components to the portfolio assignment, as I've designed and adapted it for high school self-assessment--the portfolio's materials (assignments composed throughout the year) and the portfolio cover letter (a formal introduction, discussion, and reflection on the assignments of the portfolio, with an emphasis on reading, writing, and student skills).

Here's an example of the concept's implementation, both for the formative portfolio in January and for the summative portfolio in June (copied from one assignment)

- A **cover letter** that reflects on the following [1.5 page, minimum]
 - o Challenges and successes realized this semester or year (any!)
 - § How have you changed as a reader or writer?
 - § What form of literature do you now appreciate?

§ What have you found to be your greatest success this year? Your greatest challenge?

- o A discussion of each assignment category (in general) and one example of each category

§ Why did you choose the journal entries that you chose? What do they show about your semester/year? What is one example of your point?

- o Hopes for next semester/year and the rest of high school English!

§ Details are critical here: how do you wish to develop as a student next semester/year? What will you take with you from our class? What will you look for next year and beyond?

· **Portfolio Contents: [Minimum requirement:]** 4 journal entries, 2 works of analytic writing (unrevised, homework form), 1 work of analytic writing (essay, revised), 2 works of creative writing, and one thematic reflection [**distributed across the semester/year**]

Portfolio Samples

As it's important to both show examples of successful portfolios and offer students an appropriate language to identify skills learned, here are some sample paragraphs from some student writing:

When looking over my homework assignments, I found that I wrote my best work when I was interested in what I was writing about. For example, when I had to read numerous articles regarding prohibition of alcohol in Reservations, it was simple to construct a response because it was a topic that interested me and therefore I had many opinions on the matter. With written homeworks that are not usually graded, it is easy to miss grammatical and spelling errors so my first step was to fix that.

In editing this portfolio, my main goal was to achieve a high grammatical and structural works, while trying to show the rough edges of the original writing. In doing this, I cleaned up my spelling and grammar, and may have replaced sentences in my journal's so they make chronological sense. In any homework assignments, I did the same thing. In my poetry, I just checked for grammar and spelling, but didn't change anything structurally. I felt that the original structures I put in were appropriate for the work. In my essay, I just rechecked for grammar, spelling, and structural issues.

When you begin to pour over my journals, you'll start to notice a trend. The first six journals that I chose for the portfolio are all related to real life incidents that have happened in the past several months or involve debates of which I have a strong opinion in. All six pieces I wrote with a passion for the issue or event, and this made them more substantial in content and effortless to write.

Overall my experience first semester of English class was amazing. The journal entries we were given were thought provoking and fun. Although I found that some assignments we rushed and some assignments we spent too much time on. But the way the class was structured made up for it. All the essays and writings were great but I wish we had more free writes, where we can just write stories or more poems. But it was not only the assignments that made the class the great experience I had, it was also the kids in the class.

A different piece, the close reading of a poem essay, is also representative of my growth as a writer, but it contrasts "The Muse." I worked on this one for many hours, and I experimented with creative language while discussing poetry in a pros format. This was the perfect assignment to work with more poetic language, because I was analyzing poetry. I think the assignment really changed the way I've written. Since that essay, I've used more descriptive language. Furthermore, this essay possesses a profound relevance to my theme. I was trying to figure out, based on the poet's work, what their intentions in writing their poems were. While I wasn't able to get into a poet's head, and figure out exactly what her or she was thinking, I did come up with many interesting readings of the poem, that had meaning regardless of whether or not those were the poet's original intentions. The close reading of a poem essay was a great assignment because it gave me the opportunity to experiment with more creative language, and it gave me a chance to analyze poet's motives.

Portfolio Rubric

Finally, I offer students a rubric to plan how I'll respond and assess their letter writing and portfolio presentation--see below for an example:

Freshman Rubric: Portfolio

Grading Key: 0=absent; 1=barely present; 2=present, but not fully realized; 3=meeting standard, but not distinctly your own;
4=strong fulfillment of the standard; 5=exceptional fulfillment of the standard

	0-5 (absent-exceptional)	Comments
Assignments in portfolio: Uniform presentation; each category is addressed and at least one assignment in each category is referenced; assignments are minimally polished and if not, are intentionally left so		
Cover Letter: Meets minimum length; assesses challenges and successes of the year; attempts to offer both an assessment of student work in the portfolio, and a self-assessment of the semester as a whole; projects forward to the rest of		

high school		
Style: Written in a letter form; attention is paid to the voice appropriate for a letter.		
Structure: Paragraphs are broken appropriately; sentences and paragraphs move easily from one to the next; the letter is both an easy read and a complex presentation		
Mechanics: Attention to detail of composition, including comma usage and sentence syntax. Spelling is polished, and presentation is uniform. Attention is paid to revision and to balancing the formal/informal nature of a cover letter.		

Name:

Grade: ____ / 25