Looking in the Mirror: Helping Adolescent Talk More Reflectively During Portfolio Presentations

by Tim Fredrick

Teenagers are vain. It's natural - adolescents are concerned with how other people see them, looking to others to establish their own identity. In our looks-obsessed culture, it is not surprising that adolescents focus a lot on their appearance to do so. I'm frequently asking students - male and female alike - to put away little mirrors as they check out their hair or their lastest outbreak of acne. They seem to be always 'looking in the mirror'. Of course, this is the literal 'looking in the mirror'. The figurative 'looking in the mirror' - also known as reflection, the act of looking at one's self as a person and as a learner - is not as common among adolescents. Reflection, though, is key to becoming a life-long reader, writer, and learner, a goal I have for each of my students. The reality for many of my students is that there is a deep divide between themselves and their learning, which has grown over several years and is the effect of years of unsuccessful attempts at learning. They are simply not interested in learning or looking at themselves as learners. Doing so would be a disappointing venture.

In my time with the 9th grade students in my New York City English classroom, my first goal is to help them like reading, writing, and learning. I want them to take a real stake in what we are doing in the classroom. My students do want to get get good grades, but 'getting good grades' and 'learning' are not the same to them. They blindly do assignments, often copying off each other when they can (which is not often in my class). They look to the teacher to tell them what they learned. My hope is that their time with me will help them see that they can learn and, thus, want to do more of it.

One way I try to do this is through use of portfolio assessment. Because portfolios require students to go through their work and choose the work which best demonstrates learning, they can help students begin the difficult work of 'looking in the mirror'. Penny Silvers (1994) notes that "[students] need to begin to take a more active role in reflecting

and evaluating their learning by themselves. One way they can begin to do this is through portfolios" (1). In this way, the student must act along with the teacher to be evaluator. He can no longer sit back and wait; he is now active in the assessment process. Sunstein and Lovell (2000) write that "Portfolios give the responsibility of assessment to the assessed […] Portfolios can empower the powerless; they invite voices to speak in places which usually value obedient silence" (xiii). My students who learned to be 'powerless' in their education can begin to take back some of the power from Teacher and take a larger stake in their education. Their voices are required and heard.

Looking but seeing nothing

In past years, though, when I've used portfolio assessment, something has always been off. They never looked or read like I wanted. One trouble was with students losing the semester's work. Oftentimes, the portfolio only contained the work I had just recently handed back. This was not because the students had not learned anything; it was simply because the work had been lost to disorganized bookbags and messy rooms. Several students didn't even have the work I had most recently handed back. What was most frustrating for me was that I had students buy folders at the beginning of the year and reminded them each time I handed work back to put the work in the folders because they would need them to complete their portfolios.

Another trouble existed in the students' cover letters. These letters are the reflective component of the portfolios where students try to communicate their reasoning behind selecting and including certain work. This is where they are supposed to do the real work of the portfolios: looking into the metaphorical mirror and telling me what they see. Some letters were very insightful and helped me to see learning I had not previously been aware of. As Kathleen Blake Yancey (1998) writes, ""Without self-assessment, I would have to guess at what the student thinks -- and despite over twenty years in the classroom, I'm often wrong when I guess. We aren't mind-readers, after all, which is the point. With self-

assessment, however we don't have to be. With the student telling me what he or she thinks, the students shows me where to begin our work" (15). But moments when this happened were few and far between. Mostly, students composed rote responses about the last few assignments they remembered completing.

   Unsatisfied with the experiences I was having with portfolios, but still convinced of their potential, I spent the summer contemplating how I could improve my use of portfolios in the classroom. My first concern was setting up a system to handle the paper to ensure that students could not lose their work. I purchased folders and crates for the classroom. Students were given back their work, they read my comments, and put the work immediately into the folders. Those folders did not leave my classroom. Second, I restructured how I asked students to select their work. In previous years, I asked students to give me a certain number of different types of assignments - 5 homeworks, 10 classworks, etc. This year, I gave students the list of learning objectives for the semester and told them that they would be scored on how well they demonstrated learning for each objective. Lastly, I instituted a presentation system. I had previously relied solely on students writing cover letters, but I felt that this communication was too one-sided. To really use the portfolios in the way I wanted to - to get students to take a bigger stake in their learning - I wanted the opportunity to asking probing and follow-up questions. Students presented their portfolios to me in ten-minute one-on-one conferences.

The first look in the mirror

   Because New York City high schools run on semester schedules, I would have two opportunities at portfolio assessment this year - at the end of each semester. In the first semester, which ends in January, I carried out the plan I had developed over the summer. On many fronts it was a huge improvement. No student couldn't complete the portfolio because of lost work. If they didn't have a piece of work to show that they learned a certain objective, it was because they hadn't completed enough assignments. Working off of

established learning objectives helped students look at the entire semester, not just the last several weeks. The presentations helped me to engage the students in a conversation, clarify statements I didn't understand, and push them to do the reflective work I wanted them to do. The portfolios were a big step forward; students were beginning to really think about their learning.

As I listened to 100 10-minute presentations, I began to notice a pattern in how students talked about their work. Some students were saying wonderfully reflective things about their work, but many were not. There was little correlation between academic success and the ability of a student to talk about their work reflectively; some students who had achieved high averages were not able to talk about what they had learned and vice versa. With some questioning, most students who weren't able to readily talk about their work did start to do so. Either way, their comments about their work fell into different categories - some of the categories were reflective, other were not.

Those non-reflective types of statements were:

1. <u>Naming</u> – The student gave the "title" of a piece of work. "This is my character sketch. (Turns the page.) This is my freewriting." Naming appeared alone or as part of another utterance. Students often named work and then had other comments to make about it. If that was the case, then the other comment determined the reflectiveness of the utterance. Much of the time, though, students just named the work and this was non-reflective.

2. <u>Summarizing</u> – The student explained what the assignment is about, but does not mention about what he learned. "This is my character sketch. We made up a character and wrote a story about him."

3. <u>Giving Directions</u> – The student explained the steps of assignment. "This is my character sketch. First, we brainstormed on what kind of character we wanted to write. Then, we made up a whole bunch of facts about him like his birthday and his

favorite color. Then we decided on the important traits about our character..." This is closely related to summarizing, but differs in that the student explained the steps of the assignment as if he were giving directions on how to complete it.

4. <u>Teacher-Centered Assessment</u> - Student cited that he learned something from the work because the teacher marked it as such. "I learned a lot from this piece of work and you can tell because you gave me a good grade."

One student had so much trouble describing his learning that when I asked him leading questions about what he had learned about each piece, he looked at his work and then looked at me and shrugged. Most students, though, were able with a little guidance to move towards the reflective statements during the presentation.

1. <u>Process-Related</u> - The student reflected on his own personal process in completing the assignment. "This is my character sketch and this was a really difficult assignment for me. I had a lot of trouble starting and thinking about what I wanted my character to be like." This differs from Giving Directions in that it discussed the student's own process and the student reflected on the positive and negative experiences he had with the piece of writing.

2. <u>Criterion-Based Assessment</u> – The student compared his work to criteria discussed in class. "I did well on my character sketch because I was able to show how my character was mean instead of telling the reader he was mean." He may or may not have pointed to evidence in the text; being able to point to specific examples in the text that correspond to the criteria was preferred and considered more reflective.

3. <u>Growth Over Time</u> – The student compared two different pieces of work and showed how one is better by comparing it to a previous piece of work that was not as good. "You can see here that I did better with my freewriting because this first piece of freewriting in September I couldn't write nonstop, but in December you can see that I wrote non-stop for the entire 15 minutes."

Learning to look

After the first semester of portfolio presentations, I was pleased overall. The improvements I had made over previous experiences took my use of portfolio assessment to the next level. But, still, I had been disappointed by the quality of the students' talk about their work. They had been able to select work that showed real learning, but weren't able to point out that learning to someone else. I figured that if they could not point it out to someone else, what they had learned was not clear to them.

But, is this something that we can teach our students? Are reflectiveness, self-assessment, and self-evaluation skills that can be taught in a mini-lesson and practiced? If it was possible, this was the time to do it. Easley and Mitchell (2003) write, "In portfolio assessment, students learn to self-evaluate. The portfolio process gives them essential experience in and opportunities for identifying standards and assessing their own work against specific criteria. If students, from an early age, year after year, learn to participate in determining the criteria that meet high educational standards and to measure their own progress against those standards, they will gain a life skill: self-evaluation" (21). This skill that my students were lacking was essential to helping them reach the goal of becoming life-long readers, writers, and learners. Even if it was something that was ingrained into students as they grew up, I still had faith that like most things it could be taught.

D'Aoust (1992) recognizes that "although the teachers considered reflection to be a critical component of using portfolios, they also discovered that it was the most difficult 'to teach.' The difficulty was that most students lacked a vocabulary enabling reflection" (44) If a vocabulary is what they are lacking, it is possible to give that to them and have them practice reflective talking. O'Neill (1998) agrees: "Although students usually aren't comfortable in the role of self-evaluator, they can be taught to do it" (65).

For the portfolios at the end of the second semester in June, I decided to take the types of reflective and non-reflective statements I had observed during the first portfolio

presentations and expose students to them. I did a mini-lesson like any other reading and writing strategy and went over the different types of statements and examples of each. During their work period, they were given the list of learning objectives for the second semester and they filled out a chart which asked them for the name of the work, what they were going to tell me about it during their presentation, and what type of reflective statement they made. As I circulated, I talked with students about their statements and the categories they were using, just as I would for any other lesson. I changed nothing else about how the portfolios were planned or assembled. My goal was to change their reflectiveness.

Taking a second look

During the presentations at the close of the second semester I noticed a profound difference in how students talked about their work. There was less reliance on identifying the teacher's assessment as the reason a student selected a piece of work. I heard, "I picked this paper because it was my favorite." Students were relying more on their judgment as to what made good work. Out of 100 students presenting portfolios of more than 15 pieces each, I heard only a handful of non-reflective statements. They had taken what they learned in the mini-lesson on reflective statements and applied it directly to their presentations. I repeatedly heard students making the three types of reflective statements they had learned about.

Student portfolios were graded in two categories: one for how well they fulfilled the learning objectives and one for their reflectiveness during the presentation. In the reflectiveness category, students were scored 1 through 4. Students who scored a 4 were above standard, 3 reaching standard, 2 approaching standard, and 1 below standard. As can be seen in Figure 1, the percent of students scoring in categories 3 and 4 rose from the first presentations to the second; the percent of students scoring in categories 1 and 2 declined from the first presentations to the second. In short, after being taught the

different types of reflective statements they could make during their presentations and receiving instruction and guidance from the teacher, more students were talking reflectively about their work and fewer were talking non-reflectively.
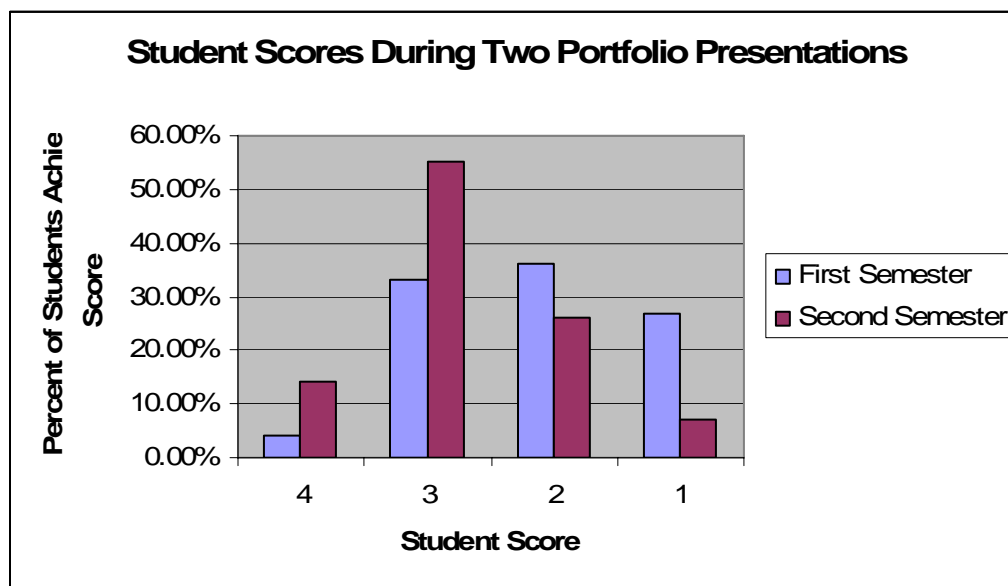
Student Scores During Two Portfolio Presentations

Figure 1

Looking back, looking forward

This experience certainly suggests that students can be taught how to speak reflectively about their work. Looking back at this year's June portfolios to the previous years, it is clear to me that my students have begun to take a larger stake in their learning. In the minimum, they are more able to show someone what they have learned, which presupposes that they themselves know what they have learned during the year. Thinking about what one has learned can only served to solidify that learning. As Diane Hart (1999) has said, "When students take an increased responsibility for evaluating their own work, they begin to internalize instructional goals and standards and to apply them to future efforts. With this growth in autonomy comes a sense of ownership of one's own learning and growth" (343).

My students still have major strides to make, though. They were able to talk about their

work, but most of their talk was very global. They rarely pointed to their texts and identified specific examples that demonstrate learning. There was one boy who had circled different areas of his papers and talked about paragraphs or sentences, not just essays. This is the kind of talking I want to help my students do next. This kind of talk is valuable work and not just wasted time. Looking specifically at work and talking about it requires higher-level thinking skills than are on any standardized tests. These thinking skills will serve students well in any endeavor.

As D'Aoust (1992) points out, "Reflection is the act of pausing to see oneself as a writer" (43). Reflection, though, is not limited to writers or the teaching of writing. Reflection should be taught to all students in all content areas. We need students and citizens who can do more than fill in bubbles. Donald Graves (2000) writes, "We've never needed portfolios more than we do now. […] Most [quick and easy] assessments do not engage the student in significant, self-evaluative, long-term thinking. Worse, when we speed up our curriculum and outstrip the possibility of the student as co-learner/evaluator we bypass the consumer for whom the education exists" (viii). We cannot have students become test-taking robots who do not connect with their learning. It is a tragedy to have students complete hours and hours of work and they do not know what they learned from it. We have to give them this vocabulary which can only help them connect to their learning and the reason they are in school in the first place.

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