

Project Title: “Seeing Progress”: Using Portfolio in English Language Arts so Student Progress Might be More Apparent, and More Motivating.”

Researcher: Anna Fish

Project Conducted: December 2011-May 2012

Delivery Organization: South East Regional College, Adult Basic Education, Weyburn.

Contact Information: afish@southeastcollege.org

The Question: “If students were to keep an English Language Arts Portfolio, would they begin to be more aware of their progress and, therefore, would that not only assist them in developing their communication skills but enhance their motivation to learn in this course? Would their progress in this course become more apparent to them and make a difference as a result?”

The Issue: I’ve had the feeling that the learners in my English Language Arts courses often lose sight of, or in the first place, don’t grasp the big picture; that is, that they are actually improving their communication skills through this course. Rather, they often come to see the activities that I set up as tedious exercises they have to plough through to get their credit, but rarely realize that they have actually learned something. It is not often apparent to them that their communications skills have in fact improved. Grades do not seem to make this point to most students in this particular course. Would student portfolios help them see their progress?

Further, although they typically don’t see their progress, would the introduction of portfolio actually help them improve their motivation? Would the realization of progress perhaps help then build both motivation and skills?

The Interventions:

- **Cycle 1:** In early December, with about half of my English Language Arts A 30 course completed, I introduced the concept of an ELA portfolio to the class. I began with a baseline questionnaire seeking data on whether learners felt they had already enhanced their skills in the areas of speaking, writing, listening and reading. I collected these in the form of written questionnaires (See Appendix A). I was able to measure against this in the second cycle.

- I then mentioned that each learner would be compiling a portfolio, and without explaining more at this time, I asked each learner to complete the K (“what I know”) and W (“what I want to know”) columns of a KWL (“what I learned”) chart on the topic of portfolios. I collected these in written form as well. I received both from a total of 5 students out of a total of 6 in December 2011. I discussed with learners that I had attended a workshop that had inspired me to undertake a study on the value of portfolios in ELA, and asked for their verbal permissions, which they gave.
- I then explained that for each of the upcoming four modules of the course, learners would select one piece of writing from each module that they would like to improve based on the assessment they would receive on it from me. They would then create a polished copy, and then display it in a plastic sleeve in a portfolio binder.

To questions about how many marks were involved, I replied that the process would be for personal satisfaction and not marks.

I then gave learners class time to select a piece of writing from Module 1 (Lessons 1-4) and create an entry. I was available to assist with editing. I planned to have learners complete this entry and then, later in December, to have them repeat the process with Module 2 (Lessons 5-8.) Then, in January, they would add items from Modules 3 (Lessons 9-12) & 4 (Lessons 13-15.).

Finally, learners would complete the L (“what I learned”) column of the KWL chart begun in December, and reflect upon the process in small group discussion and paragraph writing.

This means that over a two month period, they would have polished four pieces of their writing and would have displayed each in their portfolios. Learners could self assess their writing quality in a final reflective questionnaire which, along with the KWL chart, could be used to gauge learner attitude to their own progress and to the portfolio process. I could then compare these with the baseline (seen above).

INITIAL FINDINGS FROM CYCLE ONE:

- The baseline questionnaire results (see Appendix A) revealed that learners were in fact marginally less positive about their progress in written skills. They were not convinced they had made a lot of progress in their writing despite positive grades. It seemed worthwhile then to explore whether keeping a portfolio of “best writing” might assist learners in enhancing writing skills.
- Despite getting off to a good start with a Module 1 piece, only one of the learners completed the Module 2 entry in the busy-ness just before Christmas. In the New Year,

with the end of semester 1 looming, I did not find/make time to continue the process, and thought that I would try again in the second semester with the English Language Arts B 30 course...

FINDINGS FROM CYCLE TWO:

- **Cycle 2:** As the second semester began, I could not seem to find time to restart the process, and felt that if I could just devote half a day to reorganizing the steps, it could still be worthwhile with the semester two ELA B 30 course. My supervisors agreed to a paid half day to devote to this, and I mapped out a new timeline, and prepared the end of the process reflective activity.

In Cycle 1 I had thought the concluding activity should be a small group discussion followed by a reflective paragraph. I changed this to a reflective questionnaire for Cycle 2—not because I thought this would be better (I didn't)—but because it would be practical and doable (it would involve less class time) and “ready to go” at the busy end of the school year. .

I also reduced the scope of the project to the first three modules only, knowing that it was unrealistic to expect there would be time to cover all four modules of work. Furthermore, I knew that many learners would be unlikely to undertake rewriting (i.e. “extra work”) without marks involved so I created a way to substitute “completing the portfolio” for another activity worth marks in the final assignment of the course.

In early March, 2012, I restarted the portfolio process with my ELA B 30 class. I had seven students this time. Some learners were continuing with portfolios begun in ELA in Semester 1, and some were new to the classroom, so I began again with KWL charts...not for my benefit or for data collection, but so that learners would reflect on the topic and engage. Then learners made their Module 1 selection.

- In early April, learners made their Module 2 entry, and in mid May their Module 3 entry.
- As one of the final activities in the class, learners anonymously completed the portfolio process assessment. I did however regrettably run out of the time needed to have learners complete the L column of the KWL chart.

The results:

At the very end of the three month trial, I gave all six remaining students (one of the original seven had stopped attending classes) a questionnaire to fill out (See Appendix B). They filled this in individually and returned it in a hand written form

Out of the five responses I got back, three learners had no suggestions about how to make the process more valuable, one (an English as an Additional Language learner) thought that another way to improve writing would be to list and correct mistakes; another learner thought that working on a couple of extra pieces would help. However, the overall response to question #1 about their writing quality was that 40% believed they had improved as a result of this portfolio intervention, while 60% thought they had stayed about the same. In regard to question 3, which was, “**Was this portfolio process valuable/enjoyable/worthwhile to you?**”, 40% responded with “quite a bit”; 20% felt it was “somewhat”; and 40% responded “not at all” This means that 60% were positive, which was encouraging... and I could see I was on the right path with this portfolio intervention .

Analysis and Discussion:

The learner feedback above leads me to conclude that the process is worthwhile because a majority of learners (60%) felt the process was at least “somewhat worthwhile” and a significant number (40%) did perceive improvement in their writing quality. Significantly, none said they sensed decline in the quality of their writing.

Upon reflection I think improvement would be more obvious to more learners if they were to also place their original writing— complete with my red pen suggestions for improvement—in the portfolios for comparison. The side-by-side difference would make the progress even more obvious. The originals could be removed at the end of the process so that the finished portfolio that learners take away from the program really is a collection of best work.

I want to test this idea in Cycle 3 and add pre-post discussions to collect data to see how they verbally express their attitudes towards writing in general—and in particular to this course—and how they may or may not have improved overall.

I also want to ask them about the value of the portfolio itself and compare those comments to the benchmark of perceived attitudes and grades prior to the portfolio experiment.

Recommendations: Although I want to do further action research with portfolio, I would already recommend this process to other ELA instructors as used thus far. I often write comments on written submissions, but sometimes learners do not even take time to read them, let alone act upon them. The process of re-writing encourages learners to benefit from the revising process and develop better communication skills; but actually seeing the difference has proven to me that a portfolio makes a clear difference. Furthermore, by building in the KWL chart and

expecting them to see their earlier—then polished work—together with their grades, they have the evidence of how well they are doing and progress or non-progress is much more obvious.

Concise Summation of the Project

Researchers and Location	Anna Fish - Weyburn (Robin Williams, research friend)
Question	Would keeping an English Language Arts portfolio assist learners in developing their communication skills and enhance motivation?
Process	Learners select one piece of writing at the conclusion of each of the four modules in the ELA course to “polish” and place in their portfolios
Data Collection	1) Learners complete KWL charts at beginning and end of process 2) Baseline questionnaire at beginning of process; Reflective questionnaire at end 3) Instructor observation ongoing
Timelines	Originally Mon 5 Dec 2011 – Mon 25 Jan; extended to May 10 2012

APPENDIX A: Baseline Questionnaire (Dec 2011)

The goals of the ELA curriculum are to enhance communication skills in the areas of speaking, listening, writing and reading:

In this ELA class I feel:

1. I have enhanced my skills in speaking:



Very much Quite a bit Somewhat A little Not at all

Please explain giving a specific example of something from the course: _____

2. I have enhanced my skills in writing:



Very much Quite a bit Somewhat A little Not at all

Please explain giving a specific example of something from the course: _____

3. I have enhanced my skills in listening:



Very much Quite a bit Somewhat A little Not at all

Please explain giving a specific example of something from the course: _____

4. I have enhanced my skills in reading:



Very much Quite a bit Somewhat A little Not at all

Please explain giving a specific example of something from the course: _____

Results:

Enhancement of skills in:

	Very much	Quite a bit	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
Speaking		40%	60%		
Writing		40%	40%	20%	
Listening		60%	40%		
Reading	20%	20%	40%	20%	

APPENDIX B:

Portfolio Process Reflections:

Date: _____

1. As you review the three (or more) dated entries in your portfolio, do you notice:

←----->

Improvement in writing quality *writing quality stayed about the same* *a decline in writing quality*

Why do you think this is the case (give *specific examples*)? _____

2. Which piece do you view most positively? _____

Please explain your reasons:

3. Was this portfolio process valuable/enjoyable/worthwhile to you:

←----->

Very much Quite a bit Somewhat A little Not at all

Please explain the reasons for your choice: _____

4. Please share any suggestions about how this portfolio process could be more valuable:

