The Teacher's Role in Portfolio Assessment

Joni Chancer

A California teacher finds the role of teachers crucial to the success of student-owned portfolios. She highlights specific classroom practices that prepare students to select and reflect successfully on their writing and reading.

"If portfolios are about self-selection of representative pieces of writing and reflection that only the student can do, then doesn't it follow that the teacher's role in this type of assessment should be minimal?"

As a teacher-consultant of the California Writing Project, I am frequently asked this question by teachers who are interested in changing the way they assess their student-owned portfolio assessment. I was challenged by this same question when I first began using portfolios with my students.

I first heard about portfolios at a conference on assessment held in Los Angeles ten years ago. It was called "Beyond the Bubble," and it brought the issues of assessment out of the closet and into the center of educational research and discussion. I particularly recall one session in which Dennie Palmer Wolf described the portfolios developed by students of art, music, and writing classes as part of a university-based research project. I was especially struck by her closing statement, which I scribbled into my notebook and underlined three times: "The portfolio is more than a collection of work; it is a conscious statement of growth." That statement must be made by the student, but it is a statement that can be supported and enhanced by an ongoing writing and reading program in which the teacher has an active, essential role as designer, facilitator, coach, and researcher. I don't just stand on the sidelines. I teach.

Using portfolios with my students has changed the way I teach. I have learned to become an observer, to take notes and reflect, to view my teaching as my own personal portfolio to revise and refine. I have discovered that, although reflection and the selection of the contents of the portfolio certainly belong to my students, reflection can be taught. It works proportionally: the more ownership I give my student in self-assessment, the more critical my role becomes. It is the teacher who sets in place the conditions and the structures for what will eventually become a portfolio culture.

In this article, I will share the classroom practices I have experimented with and refined in my personal continuing research project. The students I describe are fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students from two schools: Oak Hills Elementary School in Agoura, California, and Las Colinas School in Camarillo, California. Both schools are in suburban residential areas about forty-five miles northwest of Los Angeles. While there is no single dominant second-language group, nearly one-fifth of my students at Oak Hills Elementary are from Middle Eastern, Asian, or Pacific Island countries. Our parent community cares very much about grades, achievement, and the high expectations

required for eventual admittance to a university. The spirit of portfolios required something of a shift in attitudes about learning and growth. This was growth that could not be captured in a single grade or in a single score. The final collection, selections, and reflections of the students, as evidenced by the portfolios, convinced the parents of the value of this type of assessment more than any of my words. What blossomed by the end of the year began in September as carefully planted and gradually nurtured seeds.

Starting with Mini-Lessons: Purposeful Play

One purpose of portfolios is to give students an opportunity or a context for reflection and self-assessment. As part of the reflective process, they frequently consider such questions as:

- Why did I write this piece?
- Where did I get my ideas?
- Who is the audience, and how did that affect the piece?
- Was this piece (or parts of it) easy to write? Why?
- Was this piece (or parts of it) difficult to write? Why?
- What parts flowed, and what parts took more time?
- What parts did I rework? What were my revisions?
- If I received response, what was it? What did others like about my piece? What suggestions did they make?
- What am I most satisfied with in this piece, and/or not satisfied with this piece?
- What skills did I work on in this piece?
- Did I try something new?
- What elements of a writer's craft enhanced my story?
- What might I change? How does this compare to other pieces I have written?
- Do I have a "style" that typically characterizes my writing, and does this piece reflect that style?
- Did something I read influence my writing?
- Is this piece representative of a particular genre or type of writing? What attributes of the genre are reflected in this piece?
- What did I learn, or what will the reader learn?
- What do I want the reader to know about this piece?
- Where will I go from here? Will I publish it? Share it? Expand it? Toss it? File it?

I can't imagine a student answering all these questions about any one piece. Neither are these questions meant to constitute a reflection checklist. However, these questions do seem to be addressed frequently by my students when they tell the story of a particular piece.

For example, Maria (a sixth grade student) included in her portfolio a story titled "No Final Good-bye":

No Final Good-bye

My mother's illness began during an undiagnosed case of rheumatic fever. Her family didn't recognize the signs of the fever because her brother had just died in a boating accident. They thought she was just faking her illness to get some attention.

The lack of treatment for the fever resulted in serious damage to the heart. The doctor's prediction for a normal life was grim. They told her that she would not live past 20 and certainly not have any children.

But she defied their predictions and became a successful business woman, married, had my older brother and me and was a great housewife.

Gradually, after all these years, her heart began to fail.

I really wasn't aware of how serious her condition was, but I knew there was something wrong with my mother that no one was telling me or wanted me to know. I didn't want to go any place with my friends or go to school because I thought she would be gone when I got home. I cried at night knowing she wouldn't be alive and well much longer.

At this time it was near Thanksgiving and everyone in my family was in sort of a fake happiness. Sort of like a false front on an old store; something to cover up the real thing.

Right before Thanksgiving my mother flew back East to a famous heart clinic. The doctors told her of an experimental operation to have new valves put in her heart. But she came back depressed and her hopes for a normal life shattered after the doctors at the clinic told her that she was too old for the operation. She was forty-three and the cut-off age was thirty-nine.

For me the time while she was away was torture. I kept telling myself that my mother would come back and not have to worry about her heart ever again. But then a little voice inside my head told me to face the facts and deal with whatever came up.

Thanksgiving Day my mother went to the hospital and came back, only to have more medicine to take. The doctors could do nothing for her. But even though she had the medicine, she grew weaker. My fears were becoming reality.

I tried to deny what was happening because it was easier to just forget about it. I just wanted to believe that she would jump up and be well again for the rest of her life, just as she had been before. I wanted everything to be back to normal.

Several days before Christmas, I woke up in the middle of the night to the concerned voice of my father calling the doctor. A few minutes later I was downstairs watching the ambulance attendants place my mother on a stretcher. I

stood there watching the tail lights of the ambulance fade into the darkened road. I never saw my mother alive again.

The next morning my father woke me and told me that my mother had died at the hospital, in her sleep, without pain.

"No" I screamed. "She can't be dead! They probably got the wrong people mixed up!"

"She's dead," my father said and walked out of the room.

The funeral was the next day. I dreaded the thought of seeing the casket being lowered into the ground.

When my family got to the funeral home, I went right over to the casket and looked in. There my mother lay in her best silk dress, with her face and hands chalk white. I reached to pick her hand up, but dropped it, feeling it was ice cold.

This was truly our final good-bye.
—Maria (sixth grade)

In her letter introducing her portfolio, Maria shares the following story and reflection about the piece with her readers:

'No Final Good-bye' is a true story, and I surprised my writing group with it. It is the story of a girl whose mother dies from heart disease. It is written in the first person, so some of the kids thought it was about me. Well, my mother is still alive! But they thought the story was really sad and some of them even started to cry when I read it. When I was done reading the story to them they didn't want to respond. They said they were too sad, but I wanted them to tell me what they thought I had done a good job of in the story. I told them the story was written about my grandmother, told from my mother's point of view. I interviewed my mom, and then she told the story as if she were writing it when she was my age. The next day they gave me response. Everyone liked the metaphors and similes in my story and how I used them to show my feelings. Mrs. Chancer liked the transitions and the pacing. I liked how I used the point of view of my mother and convinced my writing group this was real.

It is clear that Maria is a writer refining her craft. She knows how similes and metaphors can make her writing more interesting. She knows the emotional power of writing and how to sequence and pace the retelling of events to capture a reader's empathy. She made conscious choices about the point of view and recognized the effect of writing with voice. And yet in the beginning of the year, her reflections focused on her "neat cursive" and "excellent spelling" and the length of her stories. What made the difference? I observed that Maria's reflections became richer, more meaningful, and more specific as she was gradually introduced to elements of the writer's craft.

Throughout the year, a focus of our writing workshop is to play with these various craft techniques, and mini-lessons have allowed the play to become purposeful. The design and teaching of the mini-lesson are the aspects of my writing and reading program in which I feel the most creative and effective. Working with students during craft mini-lessons is like guiding artists in a studio. The chapter devoted to mini-lessons in books by Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, Nancie Atwell, and Rebekah Caplan make a significant difference in my own writing and in the writing of my students. I recommend the books of these authors to any teachers interested in designing or refining a classroom writing workshop.

Typically, a mini-lesson in my class begins with the sharing of literature: excerpts from favorite books, lines of poems, favorite dialogue, interesting character descriptions, even provocative titles and first lines of novels. For example, one such mini-lesson on dialogue might begin with a quick reader's theater from Judy Blume's *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing,* a book filled with humorous, engaging conversation. After the reading, we talk about what Judy Blume did that captured us as readers. The children respond with comments such as these:

"She writes like kids really talk."

"She doesn't use the word said over and over. She uses different words."

"Sometimes the sentences are really short or not even complete, and another character breaks in with a line."

"She tells you what the characters are doing while they are talking so you can imagine it in your mind."

"Sometimes she tells you what the characters say and what they are thinking."

Before the mini-lesson begins, I think about dialogue myself and jot down a few notes. If the children have trouble getting started in their observations, I ask them to look at a particular line, passage, or even a word. I don't tell them what to think, I just focus their attention. As they make their observations, I record them on an overhead. Donald Graves (1991) suggests saving the overheads for future reference. I have found it to be an invaluable suggestion and frequently find myself saying things like, "Remember when we talked about dialogue and you said sometimes the author lets you know what a character says and then what the character thinks? Let's look at what you discovered about dialogue again." The overhead goes up. "Now I'll read a passage from Christopher's story. Tell me if you hear places where his dialogue is really working. The things we record on the overhead might help you."

Along with saving overheads, the children and I save excerpts from their pieces or nominate entire pieces of writing that are good demonstrations of a writer's craft. I use these excerpts over and over in subsequent years. The children look through our "Writer's Craft" binder with pride and see examples of their writing alongside passages from published authors of the literature we read together and individually.

Mini-lessons engage children in listening, focusing attention, learning about writing through connections with reading, experimenting, sharing, and refining. These are the attitudes and activities that eventually foster reflection in the portfolio.

Teaching Reflection: Translating to "Student-Speak"

With the recent emphasis on authentic assessments, we as teachers have been introduced to a new vocabulary. Grade books are no longer at the heart of evaluation. We converse with one another about a child's developing fluency, confidence, and experience as a reader and a writer; we understand what these terms imply. They represent important considerations in the evaluation of our students. The conversation, however, should not be limited to teachers. Ideally, I want my students to be able to reflect upon their self-perceived growth. Beginning in the first week of school, the children and I consider elements of fluency; confidence, and experience, translated into "student-speak." The focus is never negative but encourages honest recognition of strengths, areas to work on, and subsequent goal setting.

Fluency is a topic in our initial discussions and mini-lessons. Many children believe they should read and write effortlessly if they are "really good at it." They are often surprised and relieved to acknowledge that while they may be fluent readers of particular types of books, certain types of books (textbooks, information books, or even poetry) may require more attention and slower-paced concentration; maybe even two or three readings. As an example, I share with my students how I must read computer software instruction manuals slowly, sometimes even orally, before the message clicks and I truly comprehend the information. Sometimes, I need to read the first paragraph or page of a book a few times before I connect with the story and subsequently go on to read with more speed and fluency; I often choose to read poems two or three times, and somehow the meaning becomes clearer with each reading. Before long, the children begin to share examples of instances when they read and write effortlessly and other times when they need to slow down and "work a little harder."

This is a significant breakthrough for many of my students. Never before have they considered their own personal patterns of literacy. The discussions open the door not just to reflection, but also to strategies for learning and personal goal setting. Children learn not to be easily discouraged. This does not mean that they are poor readers. Understanding and accepting this opens the door for some children to what Frank Smith (1988) calls "the club of literacy." Until that door is opened, these students may stay outside the circle of the literate community and resist any consideration of goal setting or reflection of strengths and areas to work on, as this sample demonstrates:

> *I guess I read kind of slowly, at least slower than a lot of other kids. I read a few pages and then I stop and think about what I read, and what the setting is, and I try to get into the book. It works for me and it's just the way I read.*
> —Brian (sixth grade)

For other readers, their awareness of fluency patterns indicates their growing maturity and development. We talk about how more experienced and reflective readers sense and acknowledge the different ways they read:

> *When I read the* Doll Hospital *I read it quickly. The vocabulary wasn't difficult and the print wasn't small. The plot was easy to understand. But sometimes I reread a book when the author changes settings quickly, or if the book has harder vocabulary, like in* Harriet the Spy. *Then I take a little longer.*
> —Amanda (fifth grade)

> *I sometimes have to read a page over when a book starts off with a lot of characters, like in* Anne of Green Gables *or* The Witch of Blackbird Pond. *Another time when I sometimes slow down my reading or reread parts is when the author uses words I don't understand, like the old-fashioned words in* Little Women.
> —Jessica (fifth grade)

> *The books I breeze through are the funny and humorous books, for example Roald Dahl and Judy Blum books. Especially* Matilda! *They have lots of dialogue and I think that makes them easy and fun to read.*
> —Brendan (fifth grade)

Fluency in writing is also a topic for discussion from the very first day. As we spend time together in writing workshop, I invite my students to consider if they are writing longer stories. Perhaps it is easier for them to write in a particular genre or style. Are they noticing that they are writing faster? Is it easier to get the words down on their paper? Do they know what to say and how to get started?

Our conversation generally brings us to a consideration of strategies they may want to try. Some find it helpful to talk about a story before they begin to write. Other students cluster their ideas in webs on their paper. Some of my students find it easier to compose on the computer; others seek a quiet place and a familiar notebook or journal.

We talk about spelling and writing in cursive versus manuscript and what to do when either of these considerations becomes a roadblock. We discuss why fluency is important to writing and how personal expectations for first draft perfection can get in the way. Eventually, the discussions come around to the value and freedom that revision brings to the process of writing. Knowing that they can add things to their stories after receiving response or rereading a piece, reorganizing their thoughts on paper, scratching out words or whole sections, explaining things more, and polishing up certain descriptions give students faith that they can jot down ideas for fluency first, and refinement and form can follow.

Eventually, fluency becomes an important focus in portfolio reflections. In their introductory letters to their portfolios, students frequently comment on their fluency as both writers and readers, as these two examples show:

I think I'm a very good writer. When I write I sit down and the ideas just come to me! It's easy for me to write. When I write you will see I write with detail and description. You can picture it in your mind! My writing is humorous and adventurous. When I write it takes me into another world. I have written all kinds of stories. Mysteries, reports, fantasy, letters, eassys [essays], personal times, anything! No matter if it's an eassy or biografy I include humor, or something to make it interesting and sound like me! I like writing true stories the most because they are easyer to write about. I think I'm a much better writer this year than I was last year and I think the Cree Indian Naming Poem I wrote tells a lot about me.

Writes Like the Wind
Her name tells of how it was with her.
It was then, September of 1991,
that she knew,
she must be a writer.
Her pencil just moved across the paper, magically.
She wrote with creativity and humor.
The words flowed like wind out of her head
and onto the paper.
When she was done,
she was satisfied with her work.
She had ***Written Like the Wind****.*

—Lauren

I am a good writer and I am fluent once I have an idea. Sometimes it is hard for me to think of what I will write about. The genre studies we did in writing and reading helped me learn new ways to write this year. It was easier to plan my stories and then my ideas flowed better. My favorite stories that I wrote were: Blue Boy Is Missing, *a mystery story;* Stephanie and the Magical Book, *a fantasy; and* The Curse of the Swan, *a fairy tale. I like writing fairly tales, fantasy stories and mysteries the most. I have improved as a writer by becoming more descriptive. A goal I have for next year is to write a good adventure story.*
—Elizabeth

Both students clearly recognize how considerations of fluency affect their process as writers and readers.

Using Conversation: Reflection in Reading

In December of the first year that I used portfolios with my students, I asked them to "reflect on their personal growth in reading." Not surprisingly, many children responded with uncertainty and puzzled expressions. I quickly figured out that the question was too general and abstract and needed to be broken down into considerations the children would find more meaningful. I also recognized we needed a context or setting for

ongoing conversations about books and reading. I wanted the reflections to be a natural part of an ongoing process, not the point of the discussions.

I stumbled into what has become a favorite part of our portfolio classroom—book clubs. I told a teacher friend that I wanted to capture the elements of my adult book club: the sharing, excitement, and anticipation of discovering really good books. I know how powerfully influenced I am by someone else's enthusiastic endorsement of a particular book or author. Nancie Atwell, in her book *In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning* (1987), beautifully describes a structure for sharing self-selected books: reading workshop. My book clubs are a slightly modified spin-off of Atwell's model.

With my fourth and fifth grade students, an equal emphasis is placed upon the oral conversations about books after sharing Lit Letters in an established group. I meet with my students every week in small book clubs of five to seven heterogeneously grouped students. Each club member comes to the meeting with a Lit Letter about a self-selected book. I encourage the children to consider in their letters questions such as:

- What is the title/author/genre/setting/number of pages?
- Why did you choose this book?
- Briefly, what is the book about?
- Who are the characters? What are they like? Do they change?
- Why might someone else want to read this book?
- Does this book remind you of other books you have read?
- What is your overall feeling about this book?
- Did you learn anything from this book? What?
- What is your favorite part?
- What will you remember most about this book?
- Do you have favorite lines or quotes from the book?
- Was this book easy? Difficult? Challenging? Just about right? Why?

The questions focus not just on comprehension, but also on more affective, personal considerations that reflect their processes as readers. Few children answer all the questions, and some children choose not to address them at all. Often, however, the letters seem to be loosely structured according to these considerations, as this letter demonstrates:

> *Dear club Members,*
>
> *I just finished a book called* Streams To the River, River to the Sea*. It's author is Scott O'Dell. It's genre is Historicalfiction. Its through the Lewis and Clark expedition and has 163 pages.*
>
> *I chose this book because everybody in my book club read it and said it had wild adventure and true love.*

Briefly the book is about a Shoshone girl who got captured by attack. The Minnetarees who captured her betted on her to marry a cruel trader who came often to trade. Charbonneau was his name. Sacagawea was her real name and she had to marry the man without even knowing him. She and her husband join with Lewis and Clark. They needed Sacagawea to show them the way through her hometown which was jagged and hard to climb.

The characters are Sacagawea who is a brave Indian girl with lots of troubles. Captain Lewis, a rugged man with his brain as a compass and Captain Clark a strong man who knows what's best for his crew and others.

No they do not change.

My overall feeling for the book is high thanks to the description in the book and the quality of adventure.

I will remember when Sacagawea got captured it was so sad.

This book was challenging to read because of the strange names like Charbonneau.

Sincerely,
Young (grade four)

Children clearly address their letters to each other, not to the teacher. The other club members then jump off from the letter to a lively conversation. Frequently, students jot down the titles of books that interest them, and I often ask the children to come prepared with a favorite excerpt to read aloud.

Motivation, comprehension, and attention to the process of reading are evident in every letter and group conversation. One of our most memorable discussions focused on a statement one club member made that "Gary Paulson's book *Hatchet* is a boy's book." What followed was an animated conversation that bordered on debate concerning the question of whether a particular book could be gendered. I smiled, remembering how my adult book club argued about the exact same issue.

The book club meeting becomes the context for authentic assessments, providing me with rich opportunities for observation and informal note taking. Frequently during these meetings, I ask questions in student-speak that break down the more abstract query of "How have you grown or developed as a reader?" When responding to these questions, the children discuss with each other

- if they are reading longer books, "chapter" books, or if they are reading for longer time periods
- if they are willing to give new books a chance (beyond three pages) before abandoning them
- if they are reading more books

- how they distinguish a “really good book” from an “okay” book
- if they appreciate the way an author writes
- if they have favorite authors or favorite genres.

Children understand these questions, and their spiral notebooks soon become filled with Lit Letters that clearly demonstrate their development as experienced readers. The weekly conversations inherently guide them toward the metacognition and reflection that lie at the heart of the portfolio.

For years, children received a single grade in reading comprehension. The teacher, with tests and scores for substantiation, passed sole judgment on how well the students understood what they read. In our portfolio classroom, I don’t give children fill-in-the-blank comprehension tests, and I look beyond single scores on standardized tests. Through their Lit Letters, conversations, shared oral reading experiences, book projects, and journal entries, it becomes obvious to me and, more importantly, to the students that they understand what they read.

I am not surprised when most of my students include their spirals filled with their book club Lit Letters in their final showcase portfolios.

Reflecting on Writing: Not a Twice-a-Year Endeavor

By the middle of the year, my students’ writing folders are bursting with writing. These pieces were written with red-hot intensity weeks or months earlier. That intensity is sometimes forgotten when piece follows piece and students move on to new projects. I wish I could capture the essence of our conference about particular stories and the students’ verbal and insightful oral comments about the history of each piece: why they chose to write a story; what were challenging parts to write; what techniques of writer’s craft they experimented with; what revisions they made; and what response they received. Because I know the importance these considerations and reflections play in the portfolio process, I now encourage the children to record their responses during our final conference about stories they have revised and plan to publish.

I demonstrate this process with an example of my own writing. After an oral sharing of something I’ve written, I share the history of the piece. Working with my students, I have created a “Thinking About My Story” reflection sheet that helps record details and thoughts that might otherwise be forgotten.

Some students complete the sheet independently before the final conference about the piece; others seem to reflect best orally, almost conversationally. They point out particular words, sentences, or passages they like, “tough parts to write,” new techniques they experimented with, and revisions they made. As they talk and point, I jot down some of their reflections. ‘Whether the sheet is completed independently or in collaboration with the teacher, it is stapled or clipped to the drafts and published versions of the piece and saved in a cumulative folder. When students read their final drafts aloud, the sharing of their “Thinking About My Story” sheet is often included in a whole-class conference

and student-led demonstration of the reflection process. As the children look through their folders to choose their showcase portfolio selections, the "Thinking About My Story" notes take them right back to the conference and the moments of discovery and reflection. From demonstration to conversation to sharing, reflection becomes a regular practice.

Integrating Selection and Reflection: The Introductory Letter to the Portfolio

The first year I used portfolios with my students, I was especially cautious when the time came for selecting the pieces and composing the letters introducing the portfolios. I knew there was a fine line between encouraging students to consider various aspects of what a portfolio might be and prescribing what the portfolios should be. I was especially concerned about those children who appear to be naturally task oriented and who, despite all of my cautions, almost unconsciously infer: "This is what she seems to want, so that is what I will do."

It made sense to start by discussing various professionals who use portfolios in real-life situations. We talked about architects, advertising consultants, artists, and even fashion models. The children caught on right away to the idea that an architect who has designed a wide range of buildings including stores, office buildings, schools, museums, and homes would be foolish to include in his portfolio only photographs and plans of twelve banks he has designed if he hoped to win a contract to design a new, model city. On the other hand, if he hoped to be selected to design a series of new buildings for a major banking corporation, a portfolio featuring banks would be a good idea. Children see that the contents of portfolios can be flexible, depending upon their purposes.

With my fourth and fifth grade students, the purpose of the first portfolio commonly focuses on showing several things: best work; a range of work; revisions, and process pieces; first drafts, second drafts, final drafts, and published books; and often the pieces the student cared about the most. I want my writers and readers to be impressed with themselves, to say, "Wow! When I show you this body of work, there will be no doubt that I am a writer and a reader!" And so we brainstorm together what kinds of selections they might make in putting together the portfolios.

Frequently, I share my own portfolio with the students, and I talk about the reasons behind my selections. I read them my own letter of introduction to the contents I have chosen. Sometimes I show them copies I have made of student portfolios from previous years. I am very careful to share varied portfolios that clearly demonstrate a range of possibilities. Looking at and hearing aloud the introductory letters written by other students makes a powerful statement about ownership.

The children are eager to review the contents of their folders a second time, with purposeful reflection. As they select the pieces for their portfolios, they jot down their reasons for the selections. Finally, they are ready to compose their introductory letters.

Student ownership is encouraged, demonstrated, and celebrated by the teacher. The choices are theirs, but the possibilities have been expanded. The children quickly come to see that there is no single "right way" to put together a portfolio. Their letters reflect their voices, their purpose, and their individual statements of growth:

Dear Reader,

My name is Tamara and I am in sixth grade at Los Nogales School. I enjoy the beach, going shopping, watching TV, reading and writing. I have written MANY stories this year!

The first piece you will read is a description of Tahiti. I haven't been to Tahiti so I had to try to imagine it. I looked at travel books and drew a picture of it. This was the first time I really tried to use focused descriptions and sensory descriptions in my writing.

The next piece is my autobiography. I tried to tell you more than the facts about me. I put in things I like and things I don't like and even the things I hate! I put in some special memories, too. Doing the timeline of my life helped me organize this piece.

The next piece is one of my favorites. I published it into a book. I made up a character called Eek the Squeek. He's a mouse detective. I got the idea from reading a book called Nate the Great. *Mysteries are hard to write. You really have to have the plot make sense! You have to have clues that make sense too. I tried to give Eek a personality. I loved doing the illustrations and the cover of the book, too. I tried to write a book little kids would like.*

The next story is 'Halloween Night.' I like the dialogue and the description of the setting. I had to work on the plot of this story so I wouldn't give the ending away too soon.

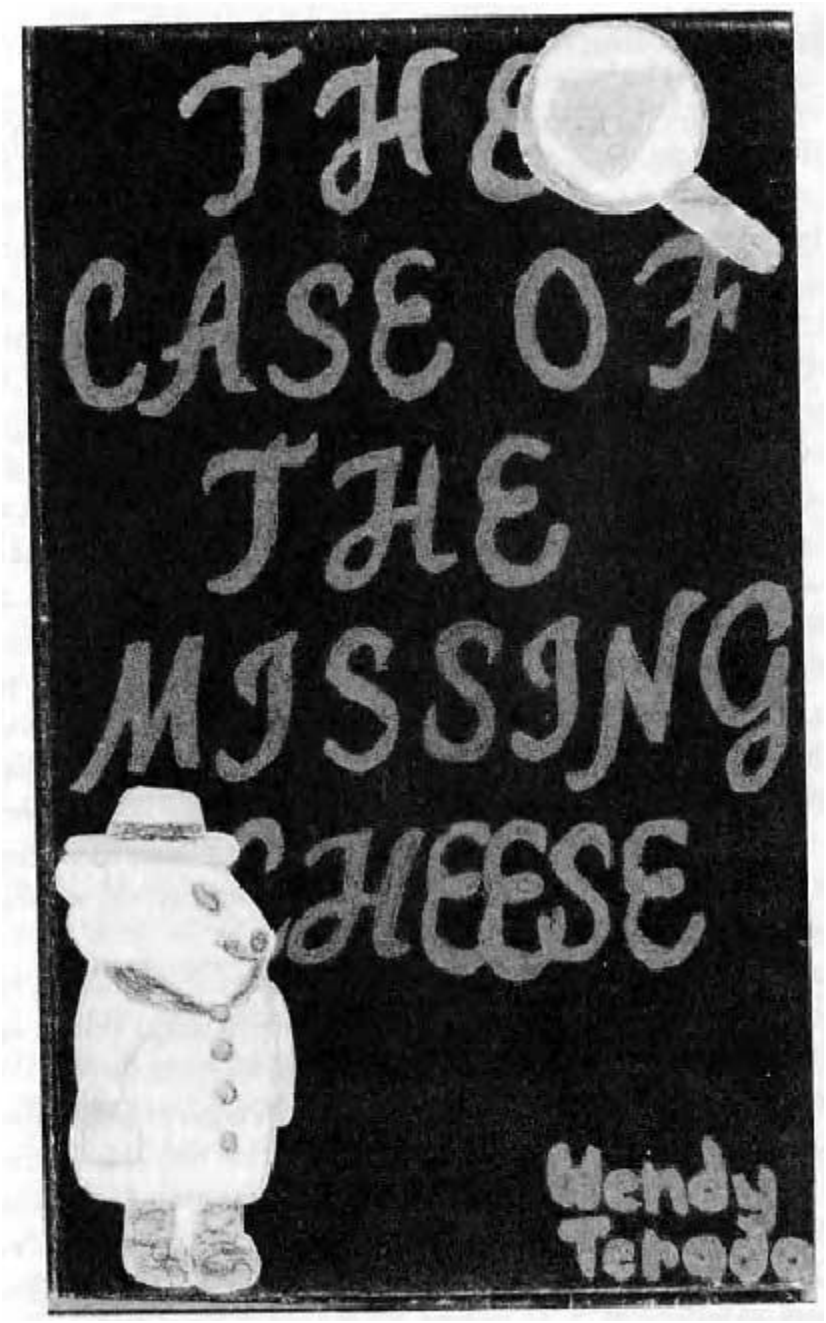
'It's Locked' is another book I published. In this story we were supposed to figure out a problem and plan the solution and then write a story. I worked hard on describing the characters and building up to the part where I describe the problem. I tried to make the dialogue sound real and the description of the stuff that went on in class. I think this is one of my best two stories.

'I Can Remember' tells about a shirt I hated wearing. I tried to describe what it looked like, and also why I hated wearing it so much. I think I did a good job as you will see. I HATED that stupid shirt!

My First Puppy' was hard to write. It is a true story about my puppy. I wanted a dog SO BAD, and when we finally got one, he died after a little while. I tried to tell how much I wanted him and how sad l was when he died.

This year I learned a lot about writing. I learned about focused descriptions, using five sense descriptions, show not tell, specific verbs and not using the same words over and over. When you read my stories you will see that I experimented with different kinds of leads and dialogue. I learned to put feelings in my stories. That was maybe most important. Anyway, I wrote A LOT but these are the BEST that I want you to read.

Sincerely,
Tamara



Book cover by Wendy Terada

Taking My Turn: Portfolios to Be Passed On

During the last week of school, the final, student-selected showcase portfolios are complete, and they have been shared and celebrated. Sitting on my desk are a portfolio and folder of collected pieces from each of the students in my class. Now it is my turn to add my voice to the story of each child's growth as a reader or writer during the time I spent with them. I review their showcase portfolio, which we discussed together during the final portfolio conference. I also read through the folder containing the pieces that were not chosen by the student. If the receiving teacher in the following grade chooses to participate in this process and has indicated to me what he or she hopes to learn about the new students coming from my class, I consider which pieces might be included in a portfolio to be passed on. I typically make a copy of the student's favorite piece and the letter introducing the portfolio. I look for two or three other pieces that demonstrate the growth or, in some cases, inconsistent development I have observed during the year. I look for the pieces that will tell the story of a child: pieces with voice and personal style. I try to vary the selections to demonstrate the range of writing. I like to include at least one piece of totally unassisted writing. Options vary according to my purposes and, ultimately, the eventual audience of this portfolio.

Finally, I choose one particular piece and quickly summarize my impressions of the student as evidenced in the writing. This is my opportunity to let my voice be heard. At first, the summarizing was difficult and time consuming, but as I became more experienced, I found the words flew from my mind to the computer. I am now able to complete thirty-four summaries in an afternoon. I don't need to analyze numbers or correct final tests; I know these children so well that their stories leap from the pages of their writing. Receiving teachers have commented on how surprisingly accurate even the shortest summaries prove to be. The following examples are written about end-of-the-year fourth grade students. Each summary is attached to a sample that I feel demonstrates the student's strengths at this point of the year:

> *Marc is a joy and a challenge in many ways. This child is verbally articulate and loves to talk! I am often impressed by the wealth of his general knowledge about a wide range of topics. He listens (rather selectively), but when he is interested, he retains information and small details to an amazing degree. However, his fluency and expressiveness totally break down when it comes to written language. Marc avoids writing. One or two sentences are his limit. He is quite satisfied with pieces of this length and is not really motivated to rethink his pieces. He will add detail at a verbal level, so my main strategy when working with him is to take frequent dictation, help him publish on the computer (a real motivation), and encourage him to share his writing orally with the rest of the class.*

> *This piece is probably an example of Eric at his most fluent and expressive. Eric was new to our school this year and came from a school where his mother reports children had limited experience with writing and where emphasis was placed on correctness, not imagination. He started the year hesitant and reluctant to write more than a sentence or two. Even with prewriting experiences, conferences,*

discussions with other children, etc., he did not seem to break through to fluency. His basic skills are usually good, but his pieces are so short it is at times difficult to evaluate his editing abilities. He hasn't felt ready to take risks with description and dialogue like most of the others in class.

Just this past month, Eric has demonstrated more motivation, and he has also shown more interest in independent reading. He moved on from the easier Judy Blum books (which he loved and reread) to more challenging books like Indian in the Cupboard *and* On My Honor. *About the same time, he started taking off with our genre studies in writing. The discussions and structures helped him get started and gave him a plan. With this fairy tale, he really worked on developing plot. Interestingly, he has become more verbal in class as well. He loves the computer and is now publishing stories at home. Inserting graphics seems to motivate him to expand short pieces. He is now feeling pleased with himself as a writer.*

Portfolios are not just about checklists, record sheets, and file folders. The preparation for portfolio assessment is much more than a two- or three-day process of review and selection. Preparation begins the first day of school. This type of assessment belongs to the student, yet the teacher has never had a more important, active role in setting in motion the structures that support a portfolio classroom.

When the final day of school is over and I have hugged the last child, locked my cupboards, and taken down the pictures, drawings, projects, and poems, I often find myself caught up in my own reflections. Portfolios, I decide, are a lot like parenthood. When children are ready to leave home, it is tempting to want to tell them how to live their lives. But instead, you bite your tongue and tell yourself you have to trust that the day-by-day life you have lived together, the joy and pain, disappointments and celebrations that are woven into the fabric of your family, have grounded and shaped your children into individuals who are ready to make decisions independently. Likewise, as a teacher, I must trust that the ongoing program that began the first day of school has prepared my students to make decisions about the contents, the reflections, and the self-assessment that are the core of the portfolio. The literary community we have created together is characterized by children who are confident and well prepared to share their strengths, goals, and discoveries about who they are as writers, readers, and, ultimately, individuals.

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