

Portfolios Invite Reflection — from Students *and* Staff

Learning Experience Forms and Portfolio Evenings are just two of the ways Crow Island School found to make the assessment process more meaningful.

ELIZABETH A. HEBERT

Four years ago, Crow Island Elementary School began a project that has reaped benefits far beyond what any of us could have imagined. The focus of the project was assessment of children's learning, and the tangible product is a new reporting form augmented by student portfolios.

More important, however, has been the process of developing our thinking and teaching around new ways of looking at children's learning. In fact, this process became more valuable to us as a faculty than the assessment product, helpful as it has been.

Our Commitment to Alternative Assessment

The project grew out of our dissatisfaction and frustration with mandated standardized modes of assessment. Standardized tests do not reflect how we teach, the effects of our teaching on children, or how we adapt instruction to individual learners. Wolf and colleagues write that "the design and implementation of alternative modes of assessment will entail nothing less than a wholesale transition from what we call a *testing* culture to an *assessment* culture." They continue:

The observable differences in the form, the data, and the conduct of standardized testing and its alternatives are in no way superficial

matters or mere surface features. They derive from radical differences in underlying conceptions of mind and of the evaluation process itself. Until we understand these differences and their network of consequences, we cannot develop new tools that will allow us to ensure that a wide range of students use their minds well (1991, p. 33).

Obviously, we had our work cut out for us. What did we do to reaffirm our commitment to a concept of learning incompatible with standardized testing? First, we did a good deal of reading; engaged in lengthy discussions about values, community building, and conferencing; and consulted with experts. We also became more deliberate about making time to visit one another's classrooms and to share and refine our observations of children. Next we began defining the questions to which we were seeking answers. Our first questions were global:

- How do we define learning?
- Where does learning take place?
- How do we recognize learning?
- How do we report instances of learning?

As we answered these larger questions, our concerns became more specific. How can we communicate about children's learning experiences with parents in ways that:

- authentically describe the child,
- speak to issues of accountability and maintain the integrity of our beliefs about children and how they learn,
- reflect the different ways that teachers organize instruction,
- provide concrete information compatible with parents' expectations?

A Compatible Theory

Some background information about our school provides a context for our project and how we went about answering these questions. Crow Island is a public JK-5 school in Winnetka, Illinois, an affluent suburb of Chicago's north shore. The Winnetka Public Schools include three elementary schools and one middle school for grades 6-8. Our lower schools have enrollments of 360-390. Although a public school system, we have a strong tradition in the progressive philosophy of education that is distinguished by:

- a commitment to a developmental orientation to instruction,
- the priority placed on consideration of the "whole child" and his or her individual mode of learning,
- the absence of letter grades until 7th grade,
- high regard for teachers as professionals.

In acknowledging the uniqueness of a child's mode of learning, the district has placed a high priority on conferencing with parents. For many years, pupil progress has been reported to parents in a conference format three times per year. Teachers had prepared narrative descriptions of children

using the following organizers: language arts, math, social studies, science, growth of the child as a learner, and growth of the child as a group member.

One expert who influenced our thinking about alternative assessment was Howard Gardner, whose "Theory of Multiple Intelligences" (musical, linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal) challenges the more traditional concepts of intelligence. The main thrust of Gardner's theory as applied to schools is that children may demonstrate the different kinds of intelligences in ways not necessarily associated with traditional school subjects and certainly not associated with traditional modes of assessment. Gardner's theory resonated with the themes of progressive education to which we at Crow Island are devoted.

A Visual Format

Gardner's theory provided a good scaffold for our thinking. The next step was to put our thoughts into a visual format. Our first rough attempt began to capture the idea of multiple dimensions of a child's learning. This primitive model consisted of a stick figure surrounded by floating boxes. As you may expect, there was much discussion about the number, size, and positioning of the boxes, but we finally agreed on a format. We call it our Learning Experiences Form (see fig. 1 for a composite example of the form, shortened for space).

Our next concern was to identify our organizers on the Learning Experiences Form. Being committed to the multiple intelligences perspective, we readily included music, art, and physical education. We wanted to recognize these teachers' long-term relationships with students, the value of

their programs, and their insights about children's learning. But what about the other Learning Experience organizers? The dialogue went something like this:

Q: How should I specify my organizers?

A: That depends on how you organize instruction.

Q: But what if mine are different from someone else's?

A: That's OK. You organize instruction differently. We already know that about one another. Now we're just writing about it.

Q: But we organize instruction differently for different students.

A: Your Learning Experiences Form will then reflect the flexibility of your teaching.

This was a crucial stage in our thinking because discussing the form brought to the surface what I term the "bilingualism" of teachers. *Inside language* — what we do in our class-

rooms — reflects our beliefs and values, years of teaching experience, observations of children and of other good teachers, and confidence in knowing what we know. *Outside language* — what we say we do in our classrooms — is influenced by community values, comfort level within the school environment, political pressures, district and administrative policies, test scores, and curriculum.

The nature of our project necessitated our speaking "inside language," a more difficult discourse because it requires feelings of safety and security. Gradually, though, we were able to experience the sharing of values that leads to the creation of a secure, thoughtful environment for children, teachers, and parents.

A Close Look at Ourselves

In order to change how we evaluated



children's learning, we realized we needed to take a close look at ourselves. We soon found ourselves undergoing an intensive assessment of our teaching, our beliefs about children, and our views of the school and its relationship to our community.

At this point, the project quite naturally proceeded from an emphasis on student assessment to a more powerful staff development focus. In order for this to occur in any school, administrators must commit to providing the kind of school environment where such a climate can flourish. Administrators also have to acknowledge that all teachers do not arrive at the same point in their growth together. As we emphasize with the children, teachers must construct their own knowledge of children, how they learn, and how to evaluate that learning. We have to be patient and sufficiently open to allow for different stages of understanding, yet focused enough to provide clarity and vision to the effort.

Improvements to the Process

We began using the Learning Experiences Form in a variety of ways. Some teachers were more conservative, using traditional school subject labels on their forms. Others coined new organizers that reflected their teaching styles. As they struggled with the new format, teachers became more thoughtful; and parents, sensing the positive energy and concern of teachers, responded enthusiastically. After the first conference using the new form, the response from both

parents and teachers was overwhelmingly positive.

Over four years, we've refined the form to meet the suggestions of teachers at kindergarten, primary, and intermediate levels. In response to our concern about how to separate out curriculum specifics and descriptions of a child's learning, one of our teachers designed a Curriculum Overview, to be printed on the back of the form, that consists of mini-statements of curriculum objectives for that portion of the year. This addition freed up the front of the form for more focused descriptions of children's learning.

Noting the absence of the child's input to the form, we designated a space for a "child's reflection" about his or her learning. The older students write their own thoughts; teachers take

dictation for the 1st graders. We've also begun to include parents' thoughts about their child's learning experience in our assessment form.

Students Tell Their Stories

The next step was to have our students create portfolios. Portfolios are compatible with Crow Island's agenda for effective teaching, authentic assessment, and faculty growth. One of the best definitions in the current literature comes from Paulson and Paulson (1991): "Portfolios tell a story . . . put in anything that helps tell the story." With these authors, we also agree about the importance of the child's participation in selecting the contents of the portfolio and with a focus more on process than on content (1991, p. 1).

FIGURE 1

LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Jean Van Zelst

NAME	5
GRADE	Winter 1992
YEAR	Mrs. Biermer
TEACHER	

Crow Island School Winnetka, Ill.

READING
Jean reads smoothly, with good expression, good comprehension. Written work displays solid sentence structure, good content. Answers are typically brief but accurate, with details added on subsequent drafts. Participates in discussions.

SOCIAL STUDIES
Our study of Japan ended with folktale plays and a magnificent Japanese feast. Jean continues to work with energy and enthusiasm during the unit on Africa. Has enjoyed Social Studies and conscientiously completed all assigned projects and reports.

ART
Jean has been doing a fine job. She has strong skills, creative ideas, and has handled the variety of materials and techniques with ease. Jean is respected by her peers and is a pleasure to teach.

MUSIC
Jean is doing well in Music. She has a good sense of pitch and demonstrates strong rhythmic skills. She is enthusiastic about music and contributes in class in a positive way.

PHYSICAL EDUCATION
Jean is an excellent student. She shows fine motor skills in all areas with a particular ability in gymnastics. Her classmates voted her to be a team captain in After School Sports volleyball.

LANGUAGE ARTS
Jean makes good use of punctuation and capitalization in her writing. She enjoys creative writing, has begun to develop some interesting stories. Has beautiful cursive writing. Usually applies her good spelling skills to daily writing.

SCIENCE
Jean has been enthusiastic about our Energy Unit activities. Has interesting, creative ideas for experiments and explorations. She's a helpful member of any group. Jean (better known as Miss Microscope) has enjoyed the Science-By-Mail club.

PERSONAL REFLECTION BY STUDENT
I'm doing well in Spelling. I've learned a lot of words but don't always remember them. Science is fun. I like Science-By-Mail better than our booklets though. I'm doing fairly well in Math. I learn a lot in Reading but wish we wouldn't have so many questions. I just like the reading. Social Studies is my favorite.

MATH
Jean works diligently, progressing steadily through the materials. Has done well with fractions, division, and multiplication. "Deal making" has been a great source of fun for her. Tackles challenging tasks with enthusiasm.

PERSONAL GROWTH
Jean has a warm sense of humor, good work habits, and a penchant for fun. Kind and caring with classmates, she works well with any group. Enjoys chatting about issues or events that interest her. An enjoyable student to teach and know.

At present, each of our students has a portfolio that represents work across all domains. Students maintain their portfolios all year and frequently have conferences with the teacher about works in progress, additions, and deletions. At the end of the year, their portfolios are combined with past years' work and stored in our Student Archives. The archives are alphabetically arranged in open shelving in our Resource Center along with historical documents, publications, and photographs of our school and students.

Portfolio Evenings

Three years ago we added a new element to our assessment project. Encouraged by the kinds of thinking that children had expressed in their Student Reflections, we realized that they were capable of much more. Getting them more involved in the process of assessment seemed to make good sense.

In preparation for "Portfolio Evenings," children review their portfolio/archive as teachers guide them with questions like:

- How has your writing changed since last year (or since September)?
- What do you know about numbers now that you didn't know in September?
- Let's compare a page from a book you were reading last year and a book you are reading now and include copies of each in your portfolio (an idea from Denise Levine, Fordham University, New York).
- What is unique about your portfolio?
- What would you like Mom and Dad to understand about your portfolio? Can you organize it so it will show that?

The idea is to ask guiding questions that help children reflect on their learning. Students are encouraged to

write about their learning and to include these thoughts as part of their portfolios. Developing the metacognitive process in students, even at a young age, heightens their awareness and commitment to a critical assessment of their learning.

In preparation for Portfolio Evenings, the teacher divides the class into small groups of six or seven at the primary level (and larger groups at grades 4 and 5) and assigns a night for each group of students and their parents. Primary-level Portfolio Evenings are held in February. We hold intermediate-level Portfolio Evenings in May, because older students prepare more extensive projects.

On Portfolio Evenings, which last for about an hour and a half, the children sit with their parents and present their portfolios. The teacher and I circulate, visiting each student and highlighting particular milestones each youngster may have attained. We are available for questions but try not to intrude, because this is really the children's evening, and they need to "run the show" as much as possible. Parents and teachers have been impressed with the leadership and independence that even our youngest students have demonstrated in this setting.

A Powerful Learning Experience

We are continuing to refine our assessment project. Some issues we're addressing are practical in nature, for example, storage containers for the portfolios/archives. Others are more fundamental, like how to use portfolios to link children's early, strong expressions of interest in a particular topic to more sophisticated elaborations later in their school careers. We are also contemplating how to gain the community's support for these alternative modes of assessment as part of a

viable system of accountability. And, finally, as a faculty we are trying to preserve the cohesive and bold spirit that nurtured this project along its way.

The entire process has been a powerful learning experience for our faculty as well as for the children and their parents. It has expressed the fundamental values of our school district and represents our joint exploration of the complex issues of children and their learning. We are encouraged to go forward by the positive effects this project has had on the self-esteem and professionalism of the individual teachers and the inevitable strengthening of the professional atmosphere of the entire school. We have improved our ability to assess student learning. Equally important, we have become, together, a more empowered, effective faculty. □

References

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Author's note: For further reading on student archives, consult the writings of Pat Carini and teachers from the Prospect School in Bennington, Vermont. The Prospect Archive and Center for Education and Research, Bennington, VT 05257.

Elizabeth A. Hebert is Principal, Crow Island School, 1112 Willow Rd., Winnetka, IL 60093.

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