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Tensions in Assessment: The Battle Over Portfolios, Curriculum, and Control

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Ms. Smith and Mr. Jones both teach the fourth grade. Both are excited about implementing portfolios in their classrooms. They have read some of the current literature and both agree portfolios will enable them to collect information about their students' progress that would be unobtainable through traditional norm-referenced achievement tests. What's more, both teachers believe the information they get from students' portfolios will enable them to provide instruction more in line with their students' developmental levels.

Ms. Smith begins to organize her portfolio program with a checklist of objectives she feels fourth graders should accomplish. Her checklist is a composite of recent statements on standards published by two national literacy organizations, along with curricular guidelines published by the state board of education, local school board policy, and the grade report card she is required to send home every 9 weeks.

From this checklist of learning objectives, Ms. Smith has decided that the students' portfolios will showcase various literacy products: a reading log, samples of narrative and expository writing, book reviews, and vocabulary lists. Ms. Smith reasons that because these products grow out of the daily classroom experiences, they provide an authentic or ecologically valid picture of students' abilities. She then analyzes these products according to the features she has created to gauge students' mastery of the curriculum.

At the end of each grading period, Ms. Smith collects the portfolios and evaluates them using a holistic scoring guide. The rubric she uses is based on the five-level grading system used to report student progress. Working

from the checklist of competencies she developed, Ms. Smith has devised benchmark criteria for each level. She has separate sets of benchmarks for reading, writing, and language development. As she reviews each student's portfolio, Ms. Smith evaluates individual pieces and measures them against the benchmark characteristics. Finally, she evaluates the overall appearance of the portfolio, its cover, and general quality of organization. From this analysis, she determines a grade she feels accurately represents the student's progress toward mastery of the curriculum.

Mr. Jones is also aware of the standards and performance objectives recommended by national, state, and local agencies. He also uses these standards as a framework for the curriculum in his classroom. Mr. Jones believes portfolios are ideally suited to represent students' interaction with the curriculum.

Mr. Jones introduces the portfolio to his fourth grade class by comparing it to a personal museum. He explains to the students that the portfolio is the place where they can keep any objects of meaning to them. He points out that these objects can be things they create, like stories, book reviews, and drawings—or they can be things created by others such as poems, favorite books, and comments by peer editors. He reminds them that because they are all different, he expects the contents of their portfolios to be different, too.

Mr. Jones and the students use the portfolios in a variety of ways. Students compare reading logs with their partners as they organize author studies or explore new topics. A piece from last week's writing becomes the text for this week's mini-lesson. Breakthroughs are celebrated publicly during group portfolio shares.

At the end of the grading period, Mr. Jones schedules individual portfolio conferences with his students. Prior to the interview, students select several key artifacts from their portfolios and use these as the foci of reflective narratives they write. During the 10-minute session, each student discusses with Mr. Jones his or her work since their last formal conference. Mr. Jones listens attentively, asks probing questions, and offers positive comments and encouragement. With a new understanding of the child's interests and achievements, Mr. Jones helps the student articulate a self-evaluation and set new goals.

The portfolio practices just sketched share some important similarities. Both focus evaluation on students' actual classroom experiences, and both contribute to informed instruction. However, the subtle differences between the way these teachers approach portfolio analysis represent huge differences in orientations. While one teacher struggles to harmonize the student to a curriculum of a priori objectives and standards, another teacher sees the portfolios as a way to harmonize the curriculum with the students' emergent needs and interests. Where one approach strives for reliability and

consistency, another acknowledges the idiosyncratic nature of learning. Where one teacher assumes the role of judge, another teacher assumes the role of audience. One approach views the portfolio as a product to evaluate, another sees the portfolio as a vehicle for self-evaluation. One encourages students to move toward convention, another enables students to set goals toward personalized targets. Where one procedure encapsulates learning, another enables students to construct meaning from their experiences.

Pressure to focus the discussion of assessment in terms of matters of best practice is real, especially given the general high stakes nature of assessment and our national passion for efficiency. However, debates over technique sidestep more substantive and critical questions pertaining to theories of learning. Just as with instruction, assessment procedures divorced from theory, even though technically sound, are pedagogically and ethically bankrupt.

The differences illustrated by the practices of our hypothetical teachers are at the heart of critical touchpoints in the developing national dialogue concerning the role portfolios might or ought to play in contributing to instruction, assessment, and the development of appropriate curriculum (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991). Central to this discussion are issues concerning the way portfolios might be analyzed and their overall reliability as techniques for collecting information and the matters of analysis (Herman & Winters, 1994; Linn, Baker, & Dunbar, 1992).

Portfolios raise critical issues—questions about standardization, validity, reliability, as these pertain to practices of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Unfortunately, the decisions affecting areas of instruction and assessment can be incongruous when they are made in ad hoc fashion or without returning to fundamental principles. Most notably is the application of positivistic theories of assessment to the constructivist theories of learning. What is particularly unsettling is that while matters of instruction are dominated by constructivist perspectives, assessment remains rooted to its positivist tradition.

Those who use portfolios in an innovative manner often find themselves under pressure to develop procedures that conform to traditional positivist theories of measurement and evaluation. These pressures can lead to a moral schizophrenia, ultimately compromising both innovative and traditional points of view of assessment. The quandary over how portfolios might be incorporated into the mainstream of American education reflects diverse and conflicting conceptualizations about the relationship between the assessors and the clients of assessment, and between assessment and learning.

The strength of portfolio evaluation is that it allows educators to engage in a form of assessment that is consistent with constructivist tenets. This view suggests a different orientation to what is done in the way of assessing, who does it, and for what purposes. Portfolios not only provide authentic

answers to traditional questions about achievement, they dramatically shift our thinking about assessment, ask different types of questions, and answer those questions in different types of language.

The intersection of these important issues forms the starting point for considering ideas about ways to analyze portfolio data. In an effort to develop a theoretical framework to guide the decision-making process, we consider portfolios in light of several fundamental orientations.

As instruments of data collection and analysis, portfolios resonate with three theoretical themes: client service, qualitative inquiry, and constructivism. Portfolio practices that abandon these fundamental themes and retreat to traditional positivist definitions of assessment risk generating information that is less meaningful, useful, or relevant.

The connection between constructivist views of curriculum, instruction, and assessment is natural (Paris, Calfee, Filby, Hiebert, Pearson, Valencia, & Wolf, 1992). This view suggest an educational context that is open-ended and divergent. It reaffirms the value of the individual, and places a premium on the student's ability to derive meaning out of his or her experience.

The chasm between constructivist and positivist orientations is itself situated within a larger, more political context. Attempts to write these orientations with their ideological counterweights: production, quantitative inquiry, and positivism are ethically untenable. To disregard the political aspect of assessment is to decontextualize portfolios. This can result in the use of portfolios for ends other than those intended—ends that are estranged from constructivism.

Further, we address those who direct criticism at portfolio practice (Gearhart, Herman, Baker, & Whittaker, 1992; Herman & Winters, 1994; Linn, Baker, & Dunbar, 1992) using criteria that should not be applied to constructivist portfolios. Much of what amounts to the misapplication of portfolios originates from a confusion over theoretical and ethical concerns.

PORTFOLIOS ASSESSMENT AND CLIENT SERVICE

Contemporary notions of assessment reflect the diversity that characterizes the nature of classroom relationships between teachers and students. Marxist theories (Apple, 1986; Fine, 1991; Shannon, 1989) have described this relationship essentially as struggles over the control of productive energy. Schools operating as production facilities, with all of the ramifications of authority, power, and purpose would be expected to devise evaluation procedures sensitive toward shifts in productivity.

Cultures entrenched in large-scale, norm-referenced assessments—assessments derived from orientations of production and quality control—might be expected to apply similar notions of standardization to portfolio assessments. Such portfolios, despite heralding banners of authenticity, eventually

manipulate students rather than empower them by monopolizing the curriculum and discouraging diversity.

What if schooling were a service rather than a production process? What would be the implications for assessment and evaluation in such a shift in orientation? Applying notions of client service to schooling recasts some key features of the education landscape. The more crucial topography is represented in Table 8.1. The history of the factory/production orientation toward education is rooted in the industrial reforms of the early part of this century (Callahan, 1962). With efficiency measured in levels of productivity, school leaders were able to bring statistical data as evidence of their good work and worth. The publication and subsequent impact of the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A National at Risk* (1983) reminds us of the hegemony of the production orientation of schooling.

What's puzzling is that the reform movement of the 1980s spawned by documents such as *A Nation at Risk* cast doubts on the effectiveness of schooling (e.g., a rising tide of mediocrity) while continuing to propose solutions and measures seemingly aimed at improving the efficiency of schooling.

In a production orientation, decisions regarding curriculum, instruction, and assessment revolve around productivity. To this end, positivist analysis procedures serve three functions: they provide general information about the school's overall level of productivity; they identify students with special needs; and, to sort students into manageable classifications. These functions are carried out in ways that are deductive rather than inductive, standardized versus divergent, quantitative rather than descriptive, periodic rather than ongoing, and summative rather than formative. The teacher's role as analyst is reduced to managerial tasks: modeling prescribed experiences, devising rewards and punishments, and keeping accurate accounts.

Traditional standardized, norm-referenced assessments provide information about the efficiency of schooling and the quality of products in terms

TABLE 8.1
The Lineage of Assessment Issues

Assessment Issue	*Traditional View*	*Constructivist View*
Orientation	Production	Client service
Values	Productivity	Customer satisfaction
Measurement focus	Efficiency/quantity	Effectiveness/quality
Theoretical frame	Positivistic	Constructivist
Conception of student	Student-as-product	Student-as-client
Assessment audience	Public constituencies	Individual students
Assessment aims	Broad view/simplistic	Narrow view/complex
Curricular goal	Uniformity	Diversity

of preset guidelines. Portfolios used to facilitate human service, that is, intended to capture patterns of experiences for the purpose of providing students with a time and place for revisiting these experiences and reflecting on their meaning. Once students become viewed as the clients of education, they also become the principle stakeholders of assessment.

PORTFOLIOS IN THE SPIRIT OF QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

Positivistic traditions of quantitative assessment operate along assumptions of hypothesis-testing. These traditions assume that literacy occurs in predictable ways, and that these ways are closely connected to the introduction and virtual mastery of specific benchmark conventions. Periodic sampling of students on annual achievement tests—prized for reliability and validity—assume generalizeability and predictability. Unfortunately, even periodic positivistic snapshots of student performance fail to account for the learning context, learner motivation and personal investment, time and space constraints, and other factors that contribute to the complexity of the development of literature behavior. Some portfolio procedures place a premium on the qualitative explanations individuals give as they revisit their own experiences. Those who utilize qualitative assessments eschew the temptation to use portfolios to direct students' learning experiences. Schemes that are flexible offer open-ended dialogue between students and teachers and contribute to the understanding of students across a fuller and more representative range of situations.

Assessment procedures that sacrifice personal autonomy to the positivistic pursuit of experimental control and objectivity inevitably create an ethic of manipulation. We find ourselves ready to abandon analytic strategies that constrain learning and penalize risk taking. Students' experiences are not uniform and constant. They vary across time and by event and situation.

As educators pursue new analytical alternatives—alternatives grounded in the data of literacy learning—they become faced with the difficulty of dealing with complexities. For a variety of reasons, traditional analytic procedures retreat from dealing with complexity, idiosyncrasy, and emerging data. The result? Rigid continua and categorical descriptions which, in themselves, fall short of representing the full range of student learning and development. Attempts to impose a priori schemes on personal experience fail to provide analyses that are sufficiently clear and meaningful.

This lack of clarity has important implications. Data analysis schemes that employ homogeneity—simple additive models of overall achievement tied to consistency versus accuracy and integrity—may serve to overshadow or displace what could be assessed, should be assessed, and acted on. Unable to access the language of positivism, a form of displacement may occur.

This marginalization conveys one clear message—that students are often subjugated by assessment rather than empowered by it.

A key criterion for portfolio analysis is that it be true to its qualitative roots. Shared characteristics between qualitative inquiry and portfolio practice are summarized in Table 8.2.

Patton (1990) described 10 themes permeating qualitative inquiry. This framework also serves to characterize the design and utilization of portfolios. Analytic procedures need to be discovery-oriented, offering opportunities to capture actual events as they unfold and to hold them for reflection.

Unstructured portfolios cast wide nets, collecting events of differentiated value and meaning. Turning away from a priori analysis schemes, they place the student at the center of the evaluation process. Students become obligated to develop a language of reflection and goal setting. Open-ended portfolios provide an opportunity for learners to organize their own experiences, explore categories, and develop labels. Management of the analysis process invites the learner to bring meaning and value to the learning/assessment cycle.

The role of participant observer seems particularly apt here. Not only does this characterize the teacher, but accurately captures the active nature of the learner's role as well. The collaborative aspect of qualitative inquiry encompasses not only past experiences, it promotes goal-setting as an ongoing component of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Formative analyses enable teachers and learners to clarify where learning is headed. Students ask, "Why am I doing this thing? Where do I want to expend my energy?" As diagnostic inventories, portfolios attempt to guide students in reclaiming control over their own learning. Students set priorities based on data emerging from the portfolios.

The portfolio process, like other aspects of truly qualitative inquiry, point out the importance of the neutrality of the data analyst. The analysis process invites participants to adopt a stance of empathic neutrality.

Portfolios integrate assessment within the teaching-learning dynamic and the analysis is situated within the everyday conduct of that dynamic. Although quantitative assessments strategies stand outside this dynamic, they rely on constructs of consensus, uniformity, and simplicity to obtain credibility. Unfortunately, these attributes may displace what might have been measured or should be measured. Because they are understood as being imposed rather than emerging—they are viewed as more invasive than inviting, more colonial than empowering.

Portfolios designed to achieve constructivist aims contain data grounded in the student's experiences. Their reflections on this grounded data enable students to link formal classroom learning with their past learning both in and out of school.

TABLE 8.2
Relation of portfolios to Qualitative Inquiry

Theme	*Qualitative Inquiry*	*Aspect of Portfolios*
Naturalistic	Lack of predetermined constraints on outcomes	Discovery-oriented
Inductive	Open-ended questions result in the discovery of important categories, dimensions, and interrelationships	Patterns emerge across portfolio elements
Holistic	Phenomenon under study is understood as complex, more than the sum of its parts	Recognized literacy as the orchestration of complex behaviors
Qualitative data	Detailed, thick descriptions, in-depth inquiry; incorporates direct quotation to capture people's experiences	Data sources include dialogue, observation, and examination of products; especially the learner's interpretation as "overlay"
Personal contact/insight	Investigator has close contact with person under study; investigator's perspectives and experiences part of the inquiry	Participant observer status; insider perspective
Dynamic systems	Attention to process; assumes change is constant and ongoing	Emphasis on facilitating improvement; provides formative analysis
Unique case orientations	Inquiry is being true to respecting, and capturing details of the individual being studied	Emphasis on rich description, multiple elements and individual outcomes
Context sensitivity	Findings are placed in a social, historical, and temporal context; dubious about the possibility or meaning of generalizations across time and space	Because they are customized assessments, no attempt to generalize across cases
Empathic neutrality	Objectivity is impossible; the inquirer includes personal experience and empathic insight while taking a nonjudgmental stance toward emerging content.	The goal of the process is for both teacher and learner to better understand their lived experiences; empathic stance places teachers in supportive roles
Design flexibility	Open to adapting inquiry as understanding deepens and/or situations change; avoids rigid designs that eliminate responsiveness; pursues new paths of discovery as they emerge	The structure of the portfolio unfolds as a reflection of the emerging nature of literacy development

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Portfolios are an outgrowth of a constructivist framework of literacy and the way literacy develops. We compare this orientation with traditional positivist notions in Table 8.3.

A central tenet of the constructivist perspective is the notion that the process of learning varies among individuals, even among individuals who have shared common experiences. Important learning breakthroughs and insights are, more often than not, serendipitous rather than predictable.

Some portfolio procedures are more than well-suited to obtain the kinds of information valued in a constructivist perspective—but only if they afford opportunities for formative self-evaluation and capturing nuance. When theoretical orientations to instruction and assessment are compatible, as in the case of constructivism, portfolio analysis techniques merge instruction and assessment until they become inseparable.

TABLE 8.3
Comparing Positivistic Portfolio Approaches With Constructive Approaches

	Positivistic	*Constructive*
View of learning	Learning believed to develop in uniform, predictable, and linear sequence	Learning believed to develop as a result of personal construction of meaning in consequence of interaction with various experiences
Purpose of assessment	To evaluate learning, facilitate sorting and classifying individuals	To guide learning, to document personal development and facilitate personal goal-setting
Control of Assessment	Directed by assessor operating on a priori expectations	Directed by client operating on the need to interpret personal experience
Contents of portfolio	Specified and predetermined; limited to materials created by client	Varied and idiosyncratic; may include materials *collected* as well as *created* by the client
Focus of analysis	Secondary analysis: rubrics & checklists Artifacts in portfolio	Primary/grounded analysis Client's interpretation of artifacts in portfolio
Units of analysis	Portfolio artifacts measured against a priori standards and preset categories and characteristics	Portfolio artifacts related to grounded analysis of personal experience, with emergent categories and characteristics
Trustworthiness	Claims to represent single "truthful" interpretation; correspondence to conventional abstract notions of development	Recognizes multiple interpretations which may shift across individual perspectives and times; correspondence to grounded data

Analysis schemes developed out of a constructivist framework share characteristics such as making meaning, the collaborative relationship between the teacher and learner, tester and testee. They foster and maintain the distinctive flavor of a community of learners.

Because the constructivist curriculum is flexible and emergent, procedures that drive analysis aim to be emergent. Built into constructivist procedures are frequent opportunities for students to express personal insights that are explanatory and evaluative. Constructivist portfolios acknowledge the learner's role as codeterminer and cointerpreter of his or her own educational experience.

Portfolios are ideally suited to maximize opportunities for customization and personalization of curricula, instruction, and assessment. However, the application of positivist analytical strategies may reduce the likelihood of this sort of customization.

A constructivist portfolio analysis plan would be expected to serve the purposes just outlined: to capture and build on the processes of learning. More specifically, a portfolio analysis plan built on the theoretical frameworks of service, qualitative inquiry, and constructivism might be distinguished by four features: open-ended, elemental, perspectival, and purposeful.

Student-centered learning is expected to be unique. Literacy portfolios intended to collect information about that process need to be *open-ended* to accurately capture a full range of real and often fortuitous individual experiences. Appropriate analytical schemes need to be flexible to accommodate the variety in students' background experiences, interests levels, and purposes. Such plans must emerge from the learning experience not imposed onto that experience.

Constructivist analytic plans would encourage students to document their experiences, much like an archaeologist piecing together fragments of evidence. The contents of a student's literacy portfolio might not be limited to original products created by the student, and actually contain a range of artifacts.

A constructivist analytic scheme focuses on discrete elements rather than wholes. Positivistic plans assume relationships between elements which may not be accurate. The *elemental* character of constructivist analysis excuses observers from trying to force elements that are emergent and diverse into a priori and static categories. An emphasis on elements as the unit of analysis invites risk taking and exploration of new areas, particularly if both students and teachers share the understanding that not every effort will result in success. Constructivist portfolio analytic schemes reinforce this understanding by building in a record of false starts, blind alleys, and disasters. Students' critical reflection on these incidents become opportunities for learning and add value to that experience.

Although holistic assessment has somehow captured the moral high ground in contemporary discussions of classroom practice, this position reflects curious ideas about curriculum, instruction, and assessment. First, it reinforces the view of assessment as a form of measurement rather than intelligence generation. Second, it risks excluding or discounting experiences that do not coincide with curriculum guides or checklist descriptors. Third, it reinforces the perception of the portfolio as a product of the curriculum, rather than as a vehicle connecting the student to his or her interaction with the curriculum.

The power of a constructivist portfolio analysis plan is illustrated in the way historical researchers use the concepts of primary and secondary source documents. Historians term *primary source documents* various first-hand accounts—letters, diaries, oral texts, and so on—through which an individual attempts to make sense of his or her personal experiences. Historians, consider *secondary source documents* those materials that serve as outsider interpretations.

The elemental character of constructivist analysis plans contribute toward an oral portrait of an individual that is more primary than secondary, more emergent than imposed. It is an evaluation that refrains from demanding a single-minded, predetermined ordering of elements and how they relate to one another but one that allows this order to develop and shift over time.

During individual portfolio conferences, participants may be given open-ended prompts such as "What can you tell me about what you have been doing? Use items in your portfolio to illustrate or clarify your comments." In this way, the entire portfolio becomes a type of primary document, an auto-narrative, through which the individual constructs his or her own interpretation of experience. Contrast this approach with the traditional holistic scoring plans that retreat to notions of consistency in order to persuade teachers and students to accept standardized interpretations of their individualized and complex experience.

Constructivist analysis of portfolios are *perspectival*, that is, they invite multiple perspectives and are open to multiple interpretations. This may proceed along various lines: bringing multiple observers into the analytical dialogue and encouraging each observer to adopt multiple stances in the analysis process.

Attempts to address the notion of multiple perspectives appear simplistic and crude. Analysis procedures that are ongoing challenge participants to confront their own perceptions and come to grips with alternative perspectives and interpretations.

Constructivist analysis schemes are *purposeful*, in the sense that they generate information that is complex yet useful to students as well as teachers. Evidence of usefulness might be the extent to which the analysis process contributes to and supports students' growth. The process serves to keep in tact the relationship between event and interpretation, between students and teachers in a community of learners.

SOME LIMITATIONS OF PORTFOLIOS

Portfolio analysis schemes that reflect a constructivist orientation are exceptionally valuable. They extend the ability of portfolios to reveal complex data. However, there are some limitations pertaining to this perspective as well.

The strength of the constructivist portfolio is also one of its weaknesses. Personal portfolios may be less amenable to outsider, or secondary, interpretation. The portfolio conference, a necessary ingredient of the dialectic between teachers and students may be affected by traditional conceptions of evaluation and grading, as ways of doing business in school. Students might feel pressured by the prevailing social conventions and unequal distribution of power and authority to alter their perceptions to conform to the teacher's agenda.

Because the constructivist notion of portfolio analysis resists standardization, the entire process is sensitive to influences caused by the way in which it is introduced and maintained. The rich relationships between students and their teachers may play key roles in making up for the lack of a priori guidelines and determine the success of the analysis process.

Students' ability to take responsibility for developing their own criteria, for collecting and organizing elements, for reflecting on their development and setting goals needs to be determined and nurtured. Our instructional conventions have traditionally identified the culmination of the learning cycle as application. Constructivist theories suggest that the learning cycle is incomplete until students have demonstrated evidence of an ability to monitor the quality of the goals they set, the personal literacy strategies they choose, and their perception of the outcomes of specific learning experiences.

The development of a metacognitive framework, essential for independent learning, is reflected in the usefulness of the portfolio analysis. Naive learners may not have sufficiently well-developed understanding of a complex issue to collect and organize experiences appropriately. They might discount or neglect important data. The portfolio may offer misleading evidence of the student's ability vis à vis various specific literacy goals. Sophistication in the collection and analysis of intelligence might be inevitable. Fenner (1994), for example, found that participation in the process of portfolio analysis affected the ways students think and talk about their learning.

The constructivist analysis process is embedded in the learning context. However, this limits the meaningfulness of the analysis to the degree to which the student and the assessor share contexts. Insider information may be essential to develop rich understanding. If the connection between shared experience and interpretation is vital, the application of portfolio schemes to inquiry requiring wide-scale assessment seems problematic.

Finally, the portfolio has the inescapable appearance of a product. The portfolio is presumed to contain evidence of student learning. For classroom

teachers who continue to focus on this product nature of the portfolio, their positivist analysis will describe the quality of these products rather than approaching these as shadows cast by far more-interesting processes, attitudes, and complex understandings. Unfortunately, such abstract notions labor in the compelling appearance of the portfolio-as-product.

The analytic guidelines offered here are fundamentally true to their qualitative roots. As such, we consider the rich, descriptive nature of the intelligence generated through these procedures reasons to reexamine the way portfolios are being introduced and utilized in school literacy curricula.

We find ourselves perplexed with the positivistic leanings of psychometricians perseverating on reliability, consistency, and generalizability as key qualities when trustworthiness, interpretability, situation specificity and empowerment seem more appropriate. With assessment intimately linked to elements grounded in an individual's experiences, constructivist analytic approaches offer stakeholders a level of trustworthiness rare among analytic techniques.

Finally, while the production orientation that continues to characterize schooling calls out for ways to make analysis more uniform, perhaps even more specific and certain, there is equal room to argue for a view of information gathering that is individual, indefinite, and ongoing. After all, this seems more in line with the way learning occurs.

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WRITING PORTFOLIOS IN THE CLASSROOM

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