

The ‘Folder’ Methodology of Improving Writing

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Abstract:

This paper will examine the use of a folder, manila, for example, that will allow each student to take ownership of his/her prior and recent writing mistakes, serve as a portfolio, and provide some relief for the writing teacher in a real scholastic setting over a period of time. This methodology assesses the reactions and progress of the student participants in order to determine the efficacy of the ‘folder’ methodology demonstrated as a means of improving the writing of both English-speaking and ESL/EFL (English as a Second/Foreign Language) students taking collegiate writing courses. The continuing problems with primary education have eliminated the certainty that a student’s ability to meet the English entry requirements guarantees that the student has acquired the necessary linguistic and academic skills for post-secondary education (Ostler, Sheldrake, Vogel, & West, 2008). The primary goal of this ‘folder’ methodology is to help to stimulate my students intrinsic motivation by allowing them to track and take responsibility for their own progress by increasing student autonomy, goal setting, and student reinforcement (Albrecht, Haapanen, Hall, & Mantonya, 2009). For the purpose of this analysis, I have used a qualitative study method that included a pool of 457 students of different nationalities attending my university’s Composition 2: Research Writing classes. I used this methodology over a period of four years, August 2007-August 2011. Out of a four year study of 457 students, seventy-eight percent (78%) stated that the folder was useful to them during their English class with me and beyond.

Keywords: Composition, Portfolio, Methodology, Learning and Teaching Methodologies, and New Learning/Teaching Models

Introduction

During my career as a teacher of writing, I have edited and revised many students' essay drafts, as well as their final paper in order to show them their errors to become better writers, which all writing teachers do for their students. However, I have noticed that the students tend to repeat their errors, and I spend a lot of time editing through the same consistent mistakes in their drafts and final papers with no relief from the constant blizzards of errors. In an effort to devise a method that would help prevent students from making the same writing mistakes, I have employed the use of folders in my composition classes that will allow each student to take ownership of his/her prior and recent writing mistakes, and provide some relief for the writing teacher. This discourse will examine the use of this methodology in a real scholastic setting over a period of time and assess the reactions and progress of the student participants in order to determine the efficacy of the 'folder' methodology demonstrated as a means of improving the writing of both English-speaking and ESL/EFL (English as a Second/Foreign Language) students taking collegiate writing courses.

I initially developed and used this methodology about a decade ago, but my use was intermittent. However, I was still able to see progress, so I decided to apply my method with consistency for the purpose of increasing my students' writing abilities. The repetitious errors my students were consistently making in their writing, demonstrating poor retention of the material I was teaching in my Composition classes, provided the rationale for testing the strength of my new 'folder' methodology. Additionally, growing concerns over the increasing numbers of ESL/EFL and other students entering college and university programs unprepared to write at the required level has demanded that a method be established to help students sharpen this skill (Ostler, Sheldrake, Vogel, & West, 2008). The continuing problems with primary education have eliminated the certainty that a student's ability to meet the English entry requirements guarantees that the student has acquired the necessary linguistic and academic skills for post-secondary

education (Ostler, Sheldrake, Vogel, & West, 2008). This paper will describe the process and results of my examination in the following order:

- Project Goals and Objectives
- Project Methodology
- Literature Review
- Results
- Discussion
- Conclusion

While the results of this method has significant implications for the improvement of writing skills in English-speaking students, the benefits are even more profoundly remarkable for ESL students considering the linguistic, cultural, and academic challenges they face being educated in the U.S. school system (Orelus & Hills, 2010).

Project Goals and Objectives

There are many common mistakes I have had to constantly correct in the essays of my students revealing disorganization and lack of revision in their writing process (Kowalewski, Murphy, & Starns, 2002). There have also been cultural issues and sensitivities that I have had to point out, such as men are not better than women, women can do a 'man's job', and women walk side-by-side with men in America, not behind them. I also teach students academic research writing structures, such as always introduce the quote, never start a sentence with a quote, never start a sentence with "so", instead use "therefore," and put a comma before two independent sentences that are connected by a conjunction, as in the example: " I like to drink tea, and I like to drink coffee". This redundancy was the catalyst for the development of the 'folder' methodology, and I have my students document these, and other common rules repeatedly broken, by writing them directly onto their folders for reference.

The primary goal of this 'folder' methodology is to help stimulate my students intrinsic motivation by allowing them to track and take responsibility for their own progress by increasing student autonomy, goal setting, and student reinforcement (Albrecht, Haapanen, Hall, & Mantonya, 2009). This method is also designed to develop students' skills of discipline-specific writing (Gunersel, Simpson, Aufderheide, & Wang, 2008). Other goals include helping students to correct many of their most common errors, including subject-verb agreement, grammar tense errors, run-on sentences, comma splices, possessive pronoun usage, its vs. it's, active vs. passive, fragments, wrong use of a word, sentence(s) not clear, noun/pronoun errors, and overcoming bias usage. I also wish to document the usage and efficacy of this method so that I can share this methodology with other teachers so that they may incorporate its use. This research sought to answer the questions:

1. What are student's perceptions of the 'folder' methodology evaluation process?
2. To what extent do students believe that the previous/traditional evaluation process contributes to their educational growth or writing skill?
3. What is the self-reported level of understanding of the purpose of 'folder' methodology evaluation?
4. To what extent do students desire an evaluation process that focuses solely on educational growth and development?

The project methodology will seek to answer these research questions.

Project Methodology

For the purpose of this analysis, I have used a qualitative study method that included a pool of 457 students of different nationalities attending my university's Composition 2: Research Writing classes. I used this methodology over a period of four years, August 2007-August 2011. I have been using this 'folder' methodology in my writing classes, both English and ESL Composition, whereby students use a folder to keep track of their writing errors to help them avoid making the same mistakes in future

writings. The Front Outside of the folder lists all of the drafts and revisions included in the folder and, as this list gets longer, students begin to see that they are both capable of the work of the course and able to write on a variety of topics. The Front Inside contains a list of possible ideas and issues to write about in the future, which is constantly added to by students on their own. I also help them with in-class discussions and activities to stimulate more ideas to write about. The Back Inside contains a list of problems students have in their papers that they should always double check which come out of peer group reviews or from the student's own observation, as well as in conferences with me. The Back Outside contains a list of their strengths as a writer provided through their group interactions, their own observations, and my comments are the sources for these statements of strengths.

At the beginning of the course, students bring a folder to class, and they are asked to write their name and other teacher required information at the bottom right-hand corner of their 'folder.' They are informed of the purpose of the 'folder' and are asked to make sure their folder is present in each class session. During the course of writing on their selected research topic, I initiate two in-class peer-review sessions, and the students are required to bring their written assignment and 'folder' to class. I collect their papers and pass them out to other students, peers, for peer-reviewing and marking. Peer-reviewers write their names in the top left-hand corner of the paper they are marking, and then, they began their peer-reviewing session. This usually takes approximately 30-40 minutes of class time per session.

When the peer-review session is over, the students give the paper back to the author. The author reviews what the peer-reviewer wrote on his/her paper. If there is a mark(s) or something written on the paper that the author of the paper does not understand, or does not agree with, I am called for a consultation with the peer-reviewer and the author of the paper so that both learn what is correct and why. If the marking on the paper is correct, then, the author of the paper must write the error onto his/her folder with an explanation of why it is wrong so that s/he learns from his/her mistake(s). If the

marking is wrong, then, the peer-reviewer writes the error onto his/her folder so that s/he does not make the mistake(s) in the future.

At the end of the course, each student is asked to fill out a survey questioning them about their impression of the 'folder', their estimation of the progress they made, and other questions related to the use of the 'folder' to gauge the efficacy of the methodology. The surveys contain open-ended and closed-ended questions that are coded into categories for analysis (Peele, 2010). The questionnaire assumes a general format and is constructed using easily interpreted coding for the close-ended questions and matrix questions for the open-ended questions. Double-barreled questions are meticulously avoided and all the questions have direct relevance to the specifics of the study (Babbie, 2007). Negative and biased terminology are also excluded from the questionnaire to avoid misinterpretations or biased results (Babbie, 2007).

In addition to the self-administered questionnaires, the respondents are also qualitatively interviewed by a proxy examiner to allow the interviews to be as objective as possible. Qualitative interviews are typically based on a group of established topics that I wish to analyze in greater depth (Babbie, 2007). The interviews contain contingency questions based on the use of the student's estimation of their writing abilities before the start of this course and the use of the 'folder' and their impressions on how they have improved due to the use of the 'folder' (Peele, 2010). The qualitative use of surveys and interviews are used to gain an in-depth understanding regarding the perspective of the participants. Consequently, the study uses autoethnography as a qualitative research approach that establishes an extension of the researcher as a member of the community (Babbie, 2007). The study uses the student's self-reflection to understand the progressive patterns from the use of the 'folder' by other students in the narrative to compare and contrast experiences. Previous research regarding the efficacy of similar methods used, as well as the importance of improving literacy skills in both English-speaking students and ESL/EFL students, and the various benefits of portfolio

use from the perspective of Gardner's Multiple Intelligences theories in the Literature Review.

Literature Review

Assessments are used to measure a student's development, learning, behavior, academic process, need for special services, and attainment to help educational personnel and others involved to make decisions about a student's future (Tezci & Dikici, 2006). The types of assessments most frequently used are observation, administration of commercial and teacher-made tests, and portfolio assessment (Morrison, 2009). Observations, checklists, and portfolios are a few methods of informal assessment, and there are no standardized guidelines for administration or use (Morrison, 2009). Portfolios are such a common tool for the assessment of progress in students that they are used by numerous professionals such as, architects, artists, and designers as a means of collecting sample works and documenting achievements over a period of time (Brown, 2004; Matas & Allen, 2004; Zorba & Tosun, 2011). This technique has also been used for educational purposes since the mid-1990s and continues to be used as a carefully selected representation of the student's work to provide evidence of their knowledge, skills, strategies, and their grasp of concepts, attitudes, and achievement in a subject over a specific timeframe (Koelper & Messerges, 2003; Zorba & Tosun, 2011).

Many teachers use portfolios in conjunction with a variety of methods to create a better-rounded picture of what the students' capabilities are and the visual demonstration of their student's progress also serves as motivation and encouragement for both the teacher and student (Ashford & Deering, 2003). The portfolio allows the teacher to keep detailed records about each student's individual language learning process, to demonstrate how their skills developed over time, and to encourage linguistic development (Zorba & Tosun, 2011). With the use of portfolios, teachers, and students are involved in a cooperative, collaborative assessment process that enables both the student and teacher to see learning not simply as an individual activity but as a communicative process which cannot be separated from the experience of its occurrence,

and ongoing assessment is provided throughout the entire semester (Cooks & Scharrer, 2006). Many teachers use portfolios in conjunction with other methods to create a better-rounded picture of a student's capabilities (Gouty & Lid, 2002). For this purpose, it is important that developmentally appropriate assessment techniques are used on each student to properly measure their abilities and needs (Gouty & Lid, 2002).

This is particularly useful when teaching students from diverse backgrounds and with disabilities. A student is assessed by what they can actually do individually, their actual work, and what they are actually doing in and throughout the curriculum. It has also been determined that the continuity of this method is an asset to student performance, and this enables the teacher to learn about the whole student and makes assessment part of the learning process (Peele, 2010). This form of assessment does not rely on test scores or statistical data as a means of evaluating a student's development or progress (Morrison, 2009). Visual observations, as well as portfolios, interviews, event and time sampling, and rating scales, can also be used routinely to evaluate each student's progress.

These methods of assessment can be implemented to determine each student's strengths and weaknesses over a wide range of curricular areas. The data collected can be used on a regular basis to format lesson plans and daily activities. Areas of weakness can be focused on more intensely than in areas the students showed proficiency. Literacy processes are significantly impacted by the student's relationship with the written language, their heritage, and their social and cultural habits (Vanhulle, 2002). Visual observations can also be done throughout the day and the students' assignments can be collected to create portfolios. Developmentally appropriate assessment techniques are used. Many teachers use portfolios in conjunction with this method to create a better-rounded picture of the student's capabilities (Morrison, 2009). Informal assessments obtain information about students' learning characteristics and behavior, using means other than standardized tools (Morrison, 2009).

As a professional English instructor, part of my professional duty is to contribute positively to the field (Roen et al., 2002). As a teacher of English Composition, deriving and teaching the best possible composition program is vital because this course is typically a foundational course many students take before moving on to more difficult English courses (Roen et al., 2002). Howard Gardner's philosophy of Multiple Intelligences introduces eight different points of intellectual stimulation an educator might cater to during the course of instruction, which are spatial, linguistic, mathematical/logical, bodily/kinesthetic, musical, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and ecology/environmental and states that, while we all have a dominating intelligence, we each possess all eight (Brualdi, 1996). Multiple intelligences would be incorporated into the lesson schematics by presenting the directive in various formats, such as explaining it verbally, as well as with audio and visual aids, interactive tools that require the students to physically participate, reading and writing assignments, and activities that require students to work together. This theory also acknowledges that culture does play a major role in the development of these intelligences, and that all students will enter the classroom with a different set of developed intelligences and intellectual strengths and weaknesses; therefore, it is best for educators to structure presentations in a manner that will engage most or all of the intelligences (Brualdi, 1996). I approach the situation with an understanding of the cultural differences that may cause variations or discrepancies between the student's ideas and mine. Using Gardner's Multiple Intelligence theories, I try to incorporate the leeway provided by this philosophy into my teaching module to allow for the emergence of an alternative method that would keep the student stimulated and eager to participate, which is accomplished through the use of detailed progress reports and portfolios. Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences proposes that educators design their modules to include and improve intelligences other than the customary verbal and mathematical/logic.

Other Theories

Understanding some of the theoretical implications associated with the importance of linguistic development demonstrates Freire's (2005) indications that education is only able to resolve the contradiction between teacher and student when both address the importance of the other to the educational process. Failure to design an educational model according to the needs of the student has caused many plans to falter in their intent to improve the performance of the students (Freire, 2005). An educational program that neglects to respect the views held by the students constitutes cultural invasion and will not yield positive results (Freire, 2005). Lesson plans, classroom observation, portfolio assessment, self-assessment, student achievement data, and student work sample reviews are all current tools used to perform student evaluations (Mathers, Olivia, & Laine, 2008). The increasing demand for higher levels of academic achievement in scholastic institutions has mandated the adaptation of new procedures and policies that would facilitate the desired levels of achievement. These researchers argued that new approaches and pedagogical practices, including evaluation, must also move forward qualification, training, and motivation of teachers to ensure that the system is staffed with competent and dedicated professionals (Mpokosa & Ndaruhutse, 2008).

Although there are many theorists who have contributed to the research on evaluation, Danielson and McGreal's (2000) Theory of Evaluation seeks to address variables such as accountability, and professional growth and development. A formative evaluation is utilized in the Danielson/McGreal teacher evaluation framework as it provides room for improvement. In this framework, several standards-based evaluative methods focus on the overall environment of the classroom, or program and are designed to measure the quality of the learning environment (Decker, Decker, Freeman, & Knopf, 2009). Providing professional development and technical assistance to all staff members as a means to increase their level of performance, professional standards, performance management, ongoing continuing professional development (CPD) and newly qualified teacher (NQT) induction (Walker, Jeffes, Hart, Lord, & Kinder, 2010) would enhance the

ability of the teachers to provide exceptional instruction that would produce positive evaluations. Information on these elements is provided below.

Formative evaluation is used for the improvement of instruction and as a consequence, it is used to direct future learning, as a tool used to measure the progression of the student towards meeting the objectives of instruction (Stronge & Tucker, 2003). Formative evaluation is considered a diagnostic evaluative tool that provides feedback in order to improve the learning process. Formative evaluation provides room for one to judge the quality of instruction. It also enables the teacher to make revisions to materials of instruction while clarifying objectives and carrying out the process of updating the instruments of measurement during the period of evaluation process. Summative evaluation, on the other hand, is a tool used to judge the teacher's practice. In order for an evaluation method to be successful, it has to demonstrate effectiveness, efficiency, and reliability. Summative evaluation determines both the achievement of the students and the grades obtained by the students while learning. While this is true for summative evaluation, formative evaluation seeks to improve on the weak areas of teaching and is, therefore, considered a tool for improvement. This perspective asserts that an objective-driven approach to evaluation is used to determine whether the objectives of education are being achieved. In this approach, the objective goals are determined and translated into performance-based objectives. Such an evaluation emphasizes the design, controls, and procedures that are meant to obtain scientific evidence.

Results

At the end of each semester of my English composition classes, I present my students with surveys to compile reports regarding my students' impressions of the class, the folder methodology, and the benefit of using the 'folder' during the course. Out of a four year study of 457 students, seventy-eight percent (78%) stated that the folder was useful to them during their English class with me and beyond. Sixty-seven percent (67%) stated that they even took the folder to their next higher academic English class as to not 'forget' what was learned, previously. Sixty-two percent (62%) stated that they continued

using the 'folder' in their next higher academic English class on their own. Learning of this, the folder proved to be a beneficial methodology both to students and teachers. Below are a few samplings of testimonies that students stated about their benefiting from the use of the 'folder'.

- “It was in good place for me to check my mistakes like grammar and mechanics against the paper I was writing”;
- “It was useful because I have a place to keep all of my errors”;
- “The folder helped me to focus on my grammar errors and gave me a place to write them and help with new vocabulary I learnt during course”;
- “I received good points from my peers and teacher and the folder was good to keep everything together to not forget”;
- “The folder increased my knowledge of my errors and how and why not to make them.”

Discussion

Evaluation invites the formation of conclusions concerning the worth or effectiveness of results attained through the established method (Mathers, Olivia, & Laine, 2008). Assessment is an important aspect evaluation and professionals use it to collect and scrutinize the information they use to better understand student development and how effective the program is (Stronge & Tucker, 2003). The effective use of the details garnered through the correct implementation of evaluative and assessment processes can enrich the purpose of the program and its ability to successfully meet the needs of the students (Vanhulle, 2002). Program goals and the positive outcomes of implemented programs can be linked to the outcomes of properly conducted evaluations (Ashford & Deering, 2003). In most situations, assessment includes a number of varied activities that combine to form a way to analytically ask and answer questions about the progress of each student and how well the program helps each student reach their individual goals (Koelper & Messerges, 2003).

I do not follow one theory whole heartedly; I use an eclectic type approach. I have studied many theories, but I can say that I am intrigued with the Observational Learning, also called The Social Learning Theory, to a degree. Also, I have studied Paulo Freire and indeed, I have been influenced by him. What I have done is to give students a place, e.g., the 'folder', to keep all of their new knowledge of writing and, in this case, their new knowledge of academic research writing. All students have similar mistakes, and all students have different mistakes. This methodology lets students build on what they already know as I ask them to take chances in their writings—do not be afraid to write. The 'folder' is a "journal" of learning.

Performance assessment techniques are often recommended as alternatives to traditional fixed-response rating scales and to standardized tests of achievement, which is why this 'folder' methodology was optimal for use in compiling a portfolio of writing samples for my students (Tezci & Dikici, 2006). Teachers must have the knowledge and know how to apply developmentally appropriate observation and assessment methods (Decker, Decker, Freeman, and Knopf, 2009). It is also important for teachers to be aware of the purposes, characteristics, and limitations of different assessment tools and techniques (Mpokosa & Ndaruhutse, 2008). They must have the ability to use different observation techniques including formal and informal observation, behavior sampling, and developmental checklists, direct writing assessments, open-ended written questions, hands-on experiments, performances or exhibits, and portfolios (Stronge & Tucker, 2003; Tezci & Dikici, 2006). Knowing the proper ethical practices as they relate to the use of assessment information is also vital to a teacher's ability to successfully use assessment methods like portfolios (Decker, Decker, Freeman, and Knopf, 2009). They must also be able to apply observation and assessment data to planning and structuring developmentally appropriate instructional strategies (Decker, Decker, Freeman, and Knopf, 2009).

Conclusion

To make the 'folder' methodology better, I could include peer assessment criteria similar to the Calibrated Peer Review (CPR) method, which uses an instructor-designed rubric to engage students in writing and in reviewing their peers' work (Gunersel, Simpson, Aufderheide, & Wang, 2008). Authentic assessment using portfolios is useful for facilitating reflective thinking that results in self-regulated learning. The 'folder' provides not only a method for assessment, but also is a catalyst for learning. These measures are dependent on process, as well as outcomes from the learning experience.

Using the processes for selection, evaluation, and alignment of work samples with a particular standard for excellence helps the student transfer what is learned within the classroom setting to the real world of work (Brown, 2004). Learning portfolios can help students understand better the learning process, as well as enhancing learning outcomes. They promote reflection on the learning experience and encourage students to think critically and make judgments about their own learning (Matas & Allen, 2004). Pedagogical training in various techniques to improve writing using portfolio assessment would assist teachers in improving the writing skills of their students (Szpara & Wylie, 2002). Numerous studies have even explored the use of electronic portfolios in the use of writing composition and to help students improve since this method allows the student's writing to be archived, indexed and used as evidence in program evaluation (Wilferth, 2003).

A further inclusion that has become a common practice to include timed essays in student portfolios, which could potentially be a way to further improve upon the method I have used in this assessment (Graziano-King, 2007). However, this practice adds to the already heavy cognitive load that the assessment of portfolios places on readers, which makes the self-revised essay an appropriate alternative method of assessment (Graziano-King, 2007). As detailed by Graziano-King (2007),

“...the self-revised essay requires that students, at the beginning of the semester, write an essay in response to a prompt that reflects a theme that runs through

course texts and discussions. Then, throughout the semester, students revisit, reflect on, and revise their essays three more times, with all reflections and revisions taking place in class” (p.75).

The appropriate use of the 'folder' methodology assessment method I have outlined in this paper will successfully assist students in improving their writing skills to acceptable collegiate levels and fulfill the purposes of evaluation.

There are six agreed upon purposes of evaluation in learning institutions: (1) evaluation aims at improving instruction through the fostering of peer support and self-development; (2) the process of evaluation procedures makes activities related to staff development to be easily identified; (3) a properly designed and well-functioning process of evaluation presents a good communication channel or link between the school system and the students; (4) personnel decisions (e.g. transfer of teachers, tenure, retention, demotion, dismissals) can be best handled through effective and efficient processes of evaluation of the efficacy of their performance through student evaluations; (5) the process of selection can easily be validated through the use of evaluation and leads to professional learning; and (6) the process of evaluation aims at protecting the learners against incompetent teachers by bringing on board structured assistance for the instructors or teachers that are marginalized (Johnson, Johnson & Westkott, 2004).

Educators play a substantial part in influencing society through the students they teach. The vitality of the teacher's role, coupled with the constant influx of emerging technological innovations, makes it imperative that teachers are properly prepared educators to handle the tremendous responsibility they bear as teachers. In the constantly changing society we live in, the ability to adequately communicate is crucial to life success and students must learn material relevant to the necessities of life, which includes written communication. The progress exemplified in the preceding examination of my use of the 'folder' methodology to improve writing in my Composition classes is a demonstration of a working methodology that will improve the overall educational experience of students by increasing their understanding and retention of the material.

About the author

Ronnie Goodwin holds a Ph.D. in English: Rhetoric and Linguistics. Having taught Composition for more than fifteen years in the U.S. and abroad in such countries, as Saudi Arabia, Japan, the West Indies, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait, Ronnie Goodwin has vast experience in the teaching of writing to both native speakers of English, as well as non-Native speakers of English.

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