

Reflection as Tension and Voice in Teaching Portfolios

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Marshall University's WAC program has from its outset employed teaching portfolios as the sole means of certifying faculty for teaching approved writing-intensive classes. Preparation for certification begins with attendance at a WAC workshop where participants undertake revision of one of their courses employing the principles of WAC and the requirements of the Marshall University WAC program (see Appendix 1, "Criteria for WAC Courses"). Shortly thereafter, participants begin teaching an experimental course during which they create teaching artifacts, record observations throughout the semester, and collect examples of student work, all of which will become essential components of their teaching portfolios.

Teaching portfolios, as applications for WAC certification, are used to document how teachers re-invent their courses to meet the minimum criteria for writing intensive courses. The WAC program provides, for applicants, specific instructions about how to develop a teaching portfolio. The body of the teaching portfolio consists of Sections A-C. Appendices (Section D) may be included for clarification. The requirements for each section are described below.

A. Letter of Introduction

Crucial to this letter of introduction is a section titled "Reflections on Teaching," where applicants discuss the

changes they have made in their teaching as a result of the WAC workshop and what they learned during their experimental course. The letter of introduction also provides applicants with the opportunity to explain the nature of the course(s) involved, to describe distinctive characteristics of the target student population, to explain how and why the included artifacts were chosen, and to outline any deviations from the approved criteria. (The committee considers these on a case-by-case basis.)

B. Course Syllabi/Assignment Sheets

In this section, applicants include a copy of the syllabus for their experimental courses and selected documents relating to assignments. These selections should explain the objectives of the assignments, demonstrate the amount and type of writing required, provide evidence of opportunities for revision of written work, and specify how the writing done in the class contributes to the student's final grade in the course.

C. Examples of Instructions, Criteria (Rubrics), or Checklists

In this section, applicants include any documents that pertain to written assignments including, but not limited to, writing criteria (if separate from the assignment instructions), assignment rubrics or primary traits analyses, or assignment checklists.

D. Appendices

In this section, applicants include examples of student work, student evaluations of the writing experience, or any other documents the applicant thinks important to make the case for WAC certification.

As teachers develop their portfolios, they rely heavily upon the artifacts they select from their experimental WAC courses.

When teachers complete the workshop, they overhaul one of the courses they teach to include WAC strategies as an integral part of the course structure. To be approved, this overhaul must translate into clear, teachable objectives, assignments which teach and test these objectives, and fully integrated evaluation and assessment measures. Throughout their experimental courses, teachers begin the reflective process by recording their observations on both their methods and student progress and collecting assignment guidelines, writing criteria, and student work. From these artifacts teachers select evidence to support their application for certification (a teaching portfolio) and begin to reflect on themselves as teachers.

The certification process evolved as a faculty-driven initiative that immediately found strong administrative support. Early efforts to create a WAC program and community included the offering of workshops, each led by Barbara Walvoord, a pioneer in the field. She served as an important consultant as the newly formed WAC committee endeavored to institutionalize writing across the curriculum with a three-hour writing-intensive undergraduate requirement. Toward this goal, the committee examined numerous programs as models and decided to adopt a rigorous and highly reflective certification procedure culminating in the preparation of a teaching portfolio. Consulting existing pedagogical literature, the committee devised the certification process outlined above. In the spring of 1994, the faculty senate and president of the institution approved the WAC program for both faculty and students. Once faculty become certified, their ongoing relationship with the WAC program requires them to submit copies of course syllabi and to continue to gather artifacts of their teaching practice for ongoing reflection. Every two years, faculty members may re-certify by submitting, as an addendum to their original portfolio, a reflective piece showing recent changes in their teaching practices.

With substantial administrative backing, the WAC committee established several programmatic incentives to encourage

and support voluntary faculty participation. First, at the university's expense, the program offers the opportunity for faculty members to attend a two-day training retreat, held away from campus. Second, faculty members who complete this workshop are provided a \$100 book stipend through the campus bookstore. Once certified, faculty members teaching writing intensive courses may limit course size to 24 students. In addition, certified faculty members enjoy the professional prestige of being one of a small number of faculty on campus allowed to teach writing intensive courses. Finally, certification has become a recognized means to strengthen tenure and promotion applications.

Reflection as Tension and Voice

Though information abounds from the approximately seventy teaching portfolios instructors have prepared (1994-2002), the WAC program is just now taking preliminary steps toward a thorough exploration of what these immensely valuable collections of teaching artifacts and teacher reflections reveal. The first step has been to try to understand the role which reflection plays in how teachers perceive themselves in the process of preparing a teaching portfolio. In 1996, the University WAC Committee undertook a series of interviews, seven of which form the basis for this essay, to cause teachers to reflect on how the process of creating a portfolio affected their perceptions of their teaching. The administrative assistant of the WAC program (M.A. English Composition) conducted almost all of the interviews, and the program director and administrative assistant selected the issues to be discussed in the interviews (see the Appendix for interview questions). Issues ranged from troubling anxieties to unexpected discoveries voiced by WAC faculty and were gathered from a variety of settings, such as formal WAC committee meetings, one-on-one discussions in the hallways, and lunch bag workshops. Teachers were chosen, representing as wide a variety of academic disciplines as possible, on the

basis of the thoroughness and hard work they had put into the portfolio creation process.

These interviews show that the preparation of teaching portfolios in a setting where certification is the end goal creates two sets of important and sometimes fructifying tensions. These tensions bring their creators into clear focus as teachers. The first tension, one often discussed in teaching portfolio literature, is opposition between the summative (outward) purpose for which the instructor prepares a teaching portfolio, WAC certification, and the formative (inward) effect that preparation has on teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and teaching (Hurst, Wilson, and Cramer 583-584; Doolittle 3; Keig and Waggoner 3-4; Murray 38; Ferraro pars. 9-10; Seng and Seng 2). The second tension occurs on a social register: the creation of the portfolio is an individual activity, yet it is predicated by, derived from, and constantly influenced by the group activities of WAC teachers who regularly share their problems, solutions, and strategies with one another and reflect both publicly and privately about their teaching.

Discussing the relationship between portfolios and reflection, Sandra Murphy argues that "portfolios have an audience; so does reflection" (8). This assertion speaks to the social-register tension evidenced when portfolios are created for the purposes of certification. Portfolios assume both a private, or individual, and public, or social, importance. The interviews reveal important clues to how teachers resolve this tension by recognizing that the portfolio is one step among many in the process of becoming certified. That is, throughout the portfolio development process, these teachers remain cognizant of the broader community within which they work as individuals.

As expected, the teachers interviewed discuss the individual nature of their portfolio development. One teacher describes his individual time as a way to "organize my own thoughts and my materials." During this individual work, teachers examine, consider, and sort the documents (such as course syllabi, assign-

ment instructions, checklists, samples of student work) they have collected while teaching their experimental courses.

What is unexpected is the extent to which these teachers rely on social interaction with the WAC community to complete uniquely individual pieces of work. The influence of the WAC community helps these teachers gain access to the WAC community, stay within the WAC community, complete a successful portfolio, and achieve closure on the portfolio development process. Almost all of the teachers interviewed expressed difficulty in separating the insights gained specifically from the creation of a portfolio from what they had gained by participating in all aspects of the WAC program. One teacher, when asked what insights she had gained about teaching, learning, writing, and herself as a teacher, explained, "I wouldn't say the portfolio did any of that. I think the WAC program did...being introduced to the ideas and trying to think about...my own teaching...that's what had the biggest impact on me. I see the portfolio...as simply the artifact of that." For her, the portfolio serves as a means of communicating with and speaking to the WAC community. It elevates her private reflections to a social act. As an artifact, her portfolio represents who she is as a teacher and provides a way to introduce herself to the WAC community. As a social act, her portfolio is the means by which she will gain access to that community.

Other teachers talk about the ways in which the community provides a structure, or frame, through which they examine their own work. One teacher describes this function of the community:

WAC...gave me a framework within which to keep working.... I found a way into a group of faculty on this campus that were also concerned about the same issues.... In the WAC community, you get to see all these good things; you get to hear all these good things people are doing...you are around people who care about teaching...so it helps you.

From this perspective, the WAC community provides this teacher with a cohort of teachers with similar interests, specifically faculty who are interested in improving and examining their teaching practices. For him, completing a portfolio serves as a way to stay within the WAC community, a place he clearly views as positive to his professional development.

In addition to the community functions already described, other interviews reveal how critical social interactions can be during portfolio development. This support is most clearly demonstrated by one teacher who described the way she completed her portfolio by engaging in social exchanges from the beginning to the end of the process. She confided her difficulty in getting started, characterizing the beginning of the process as one of “whining” and “complaining.” She used social interaction, specifically dialogue, to move herself past this negative phase. To do this, she joined forces with another individual from a different department who was also completing a portfolio and together they began a dialogue. She explains, “We did a lot of talking...informal talking...and we simply worked out a way to do it, and sort of short-circuited the whining and complaining stage.”

Now able to get started, this teacher and her dialogue partner continued their conversations as they selected and organized their supporting materials and wrote their cover letters. During her interview, she drew connections between how they talked and what they wrote. She describes their conversations in this way:

One of the things about James’ and my partnership that works is I spill out this torrent of words all the time, and James almost seems to stutter at times, and is very slow, except when we start working together. I’ve learned to get more silent and slower, and he learns to get faster and smoother in what it is that he’s saying.

This quiet slowing down for her and the fluent speeding up for him enabled each of them to compose reflective and

meaningful cover letters. Without these conversations, this teacher believes her own cover letter would be nothing more than a “torrent of words.”

With her cover letter complete, this teacher once again turned to social interactions, this time to assure herself of the quality of her work. Now, she joined forces with three different teachers, peers within her own department, and organized a “little, informal group to read it [her portfolio], to talk about what was clear, and what wasn’t clear, things that they had questions about.” In turn, she read and responded to the portfolios of the other members of this informal group. Having peers respond to her work was useful and proved to be a strategy employed by a number of the other teachers interviewed. Peer response, for these teachers, became another way of converting the individual and private act of developing a portfolio into a social and public act.

The final influence of the WAC community appears in the suggestions made by several of the teachers to require, or at least provide for, a final chance to talk with someone in the WAC community about their portfolios. They express their interest in this kind of interaction in strong and certain terms. One teacher explains that she has “all these things in one place [the portfolio]” but that “something seemed to be missing.” She continues, “Most teaching is done in such isolation....I had put a lot of time and work into it [the portfolio]. I...wanted to dialogue with somebody...I felt something was missing there.” Another teacher muses, “What would be...nice is somewhere along the line to have a one-on-one meeting with someone on that WAC committee who’s read your portfolio...a little conference just to sit and talk about it.” In these comments, the social aspect of the individual act of creating a portfolio comes full circle. In order to achieve closure on their portfolios, these teachers want to begin their experience as certified WAC instructors with a conversation about their work and their portfolio with the community that influenced both of those things.

The tension that these teachers feel between their individual and social acts of preparing portfolios clearly pivots on reflection. Likewise, the tension they feel between summative and formative reasons for completing teaching portfolios also evidences reliance on written reflection as a means of both understanding and making change. In other words, teachers had more than one reason for preparing teaching portfolios: some desired solely to gain WAC-certified status by having their portfolios judged acceptable according to carefully articulated rubrics by a committee (summative); others, though interested in WAC certification, also were seeking a means of achieving self-awareness and self-assessment (formative). But whatever their reasons, their individual processes of creating the portfolio involve and value written reflection as both a means and a goal.

To understand how and why this written reflection operates in the creation process of teaching portfolios, the categories of reflection outlined respectively by Mezirow and Kember become crucial; both posit degrees of reflection as based on the content and nature of the reflection itself (Mezirow 107; Kember 19). At the beginning level, **content reflection** examines **what** “we perceive, think, feel or act upon” (Mezirow 107). This kind of reflection occurs in all kinds of portfolio development, summative and formative. Whether motivated by certification or self-awareness, teachers also often exhibit **process reflection** in which they explore the method and manner in which they think as teachers: they examine “**how** [they] perform the functions of perceiving, thinking, feeling, or acting” as well as evaluating to what degree they are successful in performing these functions (Mezirow 107-108). The highest level of reflection teachers demonstrate is **premise reflection**. This is when they examine critically the underlying **assumptions** and presuppositions in their teaching which form the basis of successful or unsuccessful teaching practices. At this point, they may change their teaching practices by altering their underlying assumptions. Through this process, they reconstitute both their teaching val-

ues and their teaching strategies.

The perceptions Marshall faculty have of themselves as teachers, therefore, are predicated on two important things: the personal, individual goal they have for their creation of a teaching portfolio, that is, the degree to which they subscribe to a summative or formative purpose, and the nature and depth of personal written reflection that they see as important in their portfolios. What is keenly instructive about the interviews is that teachers at both poles of the summative-formative tension use certain metaphors for the teaching portfolio which encapsulate the insightful connections they are making through written reflection.

For example, at the summative end of the tension, one instructor, Mark, used the metaphor “promotion and tenure application” as a way of understanding what he was committed to in the preparation of a teaching portfolio. Mark put much emphasis in the interview on the required materials and sections of the portfolio that the WAC committee would be evaluating. Clearly, he engaged in certain kinds of reflection, primarily content and process reflection in Mezirowian terms. He had to determine whether the artifacts he had assembled were, in fact, the artifacts the committee expected to see and whether his evaluation of them (a reflection on how he performed) would match what he thought the committee would look for in his portfolio. A deep kind of reflection, involving an examination of his teaching presuppositions and assumptions, was accidental rather than deliberate, if it occurred at all. Mark says he now realizes that he missed an opportunity to examine himself carefully as a teacher:

The next time around, I think I would be more ... personally reflective on the changes that I actually went through ... some people were very personal ... I feel uncomfortable doing that. But ... after looking at some of them, I thought they revealed a lot, and I think if I were to go back, I probably would be a little more per-

sonal—just a sharing of, you know, what I went through and all, and the changes that were brought about.

Keeping separate the professional and the personal—an important guideline for academic professional behavior—was essential for Mark because he saw the activity of creating a teaching portfolio as essentially summative. What he might have learned about himself only became clear by reading others' portfolios, and the contrast pointed up unrealized opportunities for premise reflection that could have led to constructive change. Since Marshall requires a teaching portfolio, some teachers will go through that process not with the benefits of the process in mind, but, like jumping a hurdle in a race, to do whatever is necessary to get themselves to the winner's block. At the same time, the requirements placed on them force a kind of written reflection that does have some residual effect, even if, as in Mark's case, the only result is an awareness of what gifts deeper reflection might bestow.

Another teacher, Robert, uses a similar metaphor, "the seal of approval." Robert, however, also emphasizes a special kind of ordering of teaching artifacts that results in reflection: the teaching portfolio offers a "place to put things in a nice order." Considering these two metaphors together, since they belong to a single teacher's way of looking at himself, reveals yet another facet of written reflection in portfolios. While calling a teaching portfolio a seal of approval points inevitably toward the summative goal which this teacher acknowledges as primary, at the same time the second metaphor points out the messiness of teaching, which obscures any immediate vision of what is being done: the untidiness of unending talk between teacher and students, as well as the never-ending trail of paper from assignment guidelines to handouts to drafts coming back from students to polished, finished products. Evaluative thinking and writing and the physical arranging of artifacts are important reflective actions to establish order from the normal chaos of teaching, and that order is important to the teacher who creates

it. It allows both content (what) and process (how) reflection. Also, newly established order encourages the beginnings of premise reflection. Seeing an order where none existed before prompts the viewer to contemplate and evaluate teaching pre-suppositions and philosophical issues that can now be detected. The process, then, of selecting and linking, either correlatively or subordinately, pieces of teaching debris can open the way toward a deeper evaluation of underlying assumptions (premise reflection).

Teachers working at the formative end of this tension demonstrate the same interest in the effects of reflection, only to a greater degree. From interviews with two of these teachers, this deeper reflection comes as a result of a deliberate goal and a deliberate process of reflection. For instance, one teacher, Emma, understood the reflective process of creating a teaching portfolio to be twofold: an initial “spill-your-guts kind of dump reflection” and about a week later a “critical reflection.” First she “gathered all [her] thoughts in the same basket” so that as a subsequent step in reflection, she could look critically at everything written down and make evaluative choices, organize, and discard unneeded observations. During the dormant period, her “dump reflection”—a most interesting metaphor for a teaching portfolio—became a physical phenomenon in her external world, as well as her mind, so that when she returned to it she could see it in a new way. For Emma this distancing was crucial:

It afforded me the opportunity to look at each course specifically from a distance. I do a lot of daily reflection and periodic reflection as I complete an assignment or start an assignment and I always make notes But I’m always in the situation at the time. And I’m not always certain that I’m making good decisions then. And so the portfolio really made me just step away from it. I wasn’t doing that for the next class. I was looking at it for a different reason, and I think that’s why it was so helpful.

The new perspective provided by both the process of creating a portfolio and the wait period in her process inspired premise reflection, an examining of assumptions underlying her teaching practices. In her final remarks about the process and results of the portfolio, a kind of humility was apparent. Emma clearly understood her mistaken suppositions which had led to less than desirable student learning outcomes. As she put it, “Well, I think that I discovered how very little I knew about teaching, how very little I knew about learning, and in the process of discovering that I learned something about teaching and learning. And I’m not certain I ever would have discovered that [otherwise].” Emma has clearly observed the difference between on-the-spot reflections about class experiences and the critical evaluation through writing about these same experiences after they are over and she has extricated herself from all of the mental struggles that occupy her within the immediate teaching situation. Through the distancing of the teaching portfolio, premise reflection leads to change.

The second teacher, Ruth, also values the distancing phenomenon so vital to teaching portfolios, but she used the terms “metatexting” and “metacognitive writing” (borrowed from Elbow) when talking about it. She was referring to the kind of evaluation of her work that comes from careful and deliberate reflection, the kind of self-assessment that answers the important question of how the process which created that work is connected with the qualities of that work. She sees the results of creating portfolios as similar for both students and teachers: a kind of premise reflection which gives space and perspective for change. For Ruth, the kind of premise reflection that leads to change has to be systematic:

It’s the ability to systematically reflect, and the emphasis becomes on the system, on the whole... how this card is interconnected with the other cards and whether or not that interconnection is working, and it’s being systematic. Having a very particular kind of structure is

important, and I think that actually works with student portfolios because they get a sense of themselves, and this takes time also to develop.

The usefulness of this kind of reflection for her teaching became clear when Ruth refused to allow her portfolio to reside in the WAC office, insisting that she needed it for her continuing reevaluation of her teaching. She emphasizes the need she had for keeping the portfolio present with her when she talks of the “memorability” which a portfolio offers:

One of the things that’s most meaningful about the portfolio to me is its memorability. I use it in so many ways. I use it as an example that students could look at to see how to put one together, but it actually represents a form of thinking about my classes that is gradually becoming outdated because it’s changing. I think it is changing from what I had there, but the presence of that object there, that thing there gives me always something to contrast with: ‘Well, when I did that, I thought [pause] Now I think [pause] and I can see that actually I was probably moving in that direction all along.’

The changes that she made as a teacher, her reemerging as a different teacher, can only be ascertained and proved by the physical existence of the teaching portfolio because it recorded and verified in a past time certain presuppositions supporting certain teaching practices, both of which have now metamorphosed into new assumptions and strategies. The slow transformations of self-reflecting teachers can be gauged successfully by creating a teaching portfolio.

One of the most profound insights that one of our teachers provided is this: “The thing I love about these portfolios are the distant voices, and you could just hear the people’s spirits and minds talking.” For her, teaching portfolios are the truest representation of teachers, and the reflections they contain represent the conversations between the mind and the spirit. In this public and private talk within teaching portfolios, the teach-

ers in the WAC community perceive themselves more clearly as teachers. But the voices she heard were distant. Why? It may be that they were distant because they came through the many shapes of reflection. By the very act of distancing themselves from their work, teachers create voices they do not know they have, giving them the means and opportunity to transform themselves.

Our Own Reflections

We (Karen and Charles) now arrive at a new juncture in Marshall's WAC program, a place where our own reflective process guides us. We are aware that after eight years of continuous WAC training workshops (two per year), there is a diminishing number of regular full-time faculty members attending WAC training, and the number of WAC-trained faculty is four times the number of certified faculty. An informal survey of WAC-trained faculty who did not pursue certification revealed that the majority of them identified lack of time as the primary reason for postponing the development of a teaching portfolio. For the past two years, therefore, we have tried a new pattern of one fall training workshop, populated mostly by new or recent hires, and one spring portfolio development workshop. Though the average attendance of the latter workshop has been relatively small, virtually all attendees complete teaching portfolios, some after experimenting with WAC techniques for as many as six years. The longitudinal reflection, which occurs at these portfolio development workshops, provides the most solid support for faculty we can offer in the process of developing a teaching portfolio. The profound kind of reflection that makes its way into these new portfolios continues to be a source of wonder and inspiration.

The reflections contained in this article, however, portray faculty members who created the first portfolios developed in the program, and as we wrote about them, we realized that an important transformation has come about which results from

two related processes involving reflection. First, we noticed that the caliber of participants in the workshops had changed: faculty new to the Marshall campus, now making up most of the training workshops, were much more enthusiastic about WAC and already in tune to the need for and rewards of reflective teaching practice. This new composition of the workshop revolutionized the discussion and the application of WAC principles to the revamping of courses (the center of our WAC training) and allowed for much greater progress both in self-examination and in the preparation of teaching materials.

Only later did we come to understand that this process was connected with another, more complicated one that points to the heart of what our WAC program is all about. For the first six or seven years after the preparation of teaching portfolios became the benchmark for WAC approval, we were constantly aware of a fairly open hostility which more seasoned faculty were expressing in the presence of recent hires and others who placed a value on pedagogy. Evidence for this hostility filtered back to us through informal lunches with WAC faculty and our friends across campus. We realized that no matter what we did, two major perceptions were that the WAC program was elitist since it had a tangible benchmark for approval, and that preparing a teaching portfolio was not a worthwhile expenditure of faculty time and effort. We suspected that at some level these faculty members realized that the process actually required a careful consideration of (that is, reflection on) their own teaching practices and who they were as teachers, and that there might be fear at the bottom of their criticism. This undercurrent was impossible to address directly and counteract successfully. But merely by continuing to train faculty and certify those who prepared teaching portfolios, we gradually changed the environment until the nay-saying ceased.

The perception of teacher portfolio preparation is now being formed by the reflective experience itself rather than by the attitudes of those who do not care to take part. Were we to update this study with a new set of interviews, the depth of the

reflection itself would paint a very different picture of Marshall's WAC program, one which has reflective practice much more as its ultimate and shared foundation.

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Appendix 1

Criteria for WAC Courses

Writing Intensive courses at Marshall University are offered by faculty members who have been certified by the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program. These writing intensive courses must:

1. Integrate carefully planned writing assignments into the course so that they increase student learning and enhance student ability to write.
2. List the improvement of student writing among the course objectives in the syllabus.
3. Distribute specific written instructions, including criteria for evaluation, for major assignments.
4. Guide students in conceiving, organizing, and presenting written material in ways appropriate to the subject being studied.
5. Require revision of at least one writing assignment after receiving response from the professor.
6. Include, with whatever informal or draft writing is appropriate, at least one assignment that requires students to produce finished, edited prose.
7. Consider written assignments as a major part of the final grade; in most cases, this needs to be 50 percent or more.

8. Distribute writing for the course through the semester rather than concentrated at the end. (NOTE: Writing here may mean research prospectuses, multiple drafts, or progress reports, etc., of the single course project or multiple course assignments.)

Appendix 2

Interview Questions

1. Why did you decide to undertake the task of completing a portfolio and become a WAC professor?
2. Describe the process you used in completing your portfolio.
3. Describe how you would change your approach to the task if you were to start again putting together a portfolio.
4. How do you feel the process you used in putting together a portfolio parallels the processes involved in completing writing assignments in your WAC classes?
5. Do you feel you learned certain things during the actual process of completing a portfolio and then, later, gained additional insights on looking back at the experience once the portfolio was complete?
6. What would you consider the most challenging problem connected with the task of completing your portfolio?
7. What was the most rewarding experience connected with the task of completing the portfolio?
8. What did you realize you might want to revise, either modify or abandon somehow as you worked on the portfolio?
9. How much has your teaching changed? How the nature of your course design or assignments and how class time is spent since you completed the portfolio?
10. What insights about teaching, learning, writing, and yourself as a teacher did you gain through the process of completing the portfolio?
11. What changes in the process or requirements for the portfolio would make the experience of completing a portfolio more beneficial?