

Literacy Stories Extended: Of Reflection and Teachers' Portfolios

By Bonnie S. Sunstein & Joseph P. Potts

Indeed, the very shape of our lives—the rough and perpetually changing draft of our autobiography that we carry in our minds—is understandable to ourselves and to others only by virtue of those cultural systems of interpretation...meaning achieves a form that is public and communal rather than private and autistic.

—Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*, 33

It is not until we call our own learning stories into question—look again at our own schooling histories—and think about where our literacy comes from, that we can link our knowledge of content to our knowledge of pedagogy. Thanks to recent research, we know that as teachers, when we re-claim our personal learning

histories, we re-think our ideas about teaching (Britzman, 1990). And, unless student teachers embrace issues of pedagogy, they tend to teach according to the ways that they were taught (Grossman, 1991). These days such ideas seem commonplace after only a few years and many articles and conference presentations about reclaiming our “stories.” Teachers and writers everywhere these days are capturing their personal histories (“literacy stories”) and locking them into print for others to view. In the program booklet for the 1996 National Council of Teachers of English convention—titled *Honoring*

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Our Stories—the word “story,” for example, appeared 78 times in session titles; 88 when linked to the word “narrative.” The 1997 Spring National Council of Teachers of English convention, titled *Story Matters*, also focused on stories from the field. Our profession’s attention to literacy stories as they relate to teaching is indeed intense.

Just remembering our personal literacy stories is not enough to read and write and teach reflectively and reflexively. We need to analyze those stories, document what they tell us, detail goals they suggest, and understand them in relation to both community and curriculum. Despite all this current attention to story, we wonder whether our colleges of education are actually asking preservice teachers to think about what their own literacy stories actually mean for their teaching. It is not simply a matter of reflection. It is a matter of reflexivity. In our research over the last five years, we’ve recognized the importance of both. Reflection is the act of looking into the self, investigating writing histories, encounters with teachers, reading passions—in short, literacy stories. But reflexivity extends personal reflection outward:

Along with a consciousness of self comes a consciousness of others’ expectations: a classroom, a curriculum, a community’s goals for its members. “I am an authentic assessor of myself,” a student [or teacher] comes to learn as she reflects on her work, “but if you tell me what your standard is, I’ll tell you how the stuff in my portfolio shows that I can meet your standard.” A portfolio keeping process must be at once reflective and reflexive....a student [or teacher] looks first internally, at herself and her work as she reflects. But then she must look outside her self to understand the external standards that her institutions expect. (Sunstein, 1996; p. 17)

Teachers in the classroom and teachers in preparation must turn a reflexive eye toward those memories, extend them until we can articulate what our personal stories suggest about how we want to enable our students to shape and understand their own. Keeping personal literacy portfolios is one way to collect artifacts of literacy stories. With portfolios we can begin to analyze how stories construct our images of the classroom and shape our ideas about teaching. Portfolios help us organize our reading and writing memories, call them into question, and learn from them. As we collect representative artifacts, display them, and share them with our students and colleagues, we begin to see out-of-school literacies meet with in-school literacies, as they connect and as they resist.

Portfolios link our histories to our current work, too, and as we reflect on what we’ve selected, we form goals and build theory. Our teaching is situated in our past biographies, our present circumstances, our deep commitments, our affective investments, our social context. Examining portfolios over time with a community for response we can consider, re-consider, shape and re-shape, disrupt and construct our pedagogical identities and teaching philosophies. For us, as teachers, our own portfolios become a chronicle of reflection-in-action (Schon, 1983), the link we make between our professional knowledge and the “swampy lowland” of our daily practice (Schon, 1987). By writing autobiographically, we can disrupt our peda-

gological inertia and point ourselves toward understanding the way our own histories and submerged theories inform our teaching practices so that we are “no longer satisfied being a passive or private footbridge” (Graham, 1991; p. 111).

In this article, we offer examples of teachers’ knowledge as it forms in their portfolios. We have come to see portfolios themselves as sites of literacy histories packed with stories of self and other, enabling both reflection and reflexivity. In our language arts methods courses, we require our students to collect and select artifacts for their portfolios. We encourage students to select artifacts that represent their literacies and that have been produced for a variety of purposes and in a variety of contexts. Two or three times during the semester, we invite students to share their revised portfolios in small groups, to examine the confluence of past and present, and to analyze the multiple stories remembered through the artifacts. With each revision, our students analyze and synthesize in one-page, single-spaced reflections what they see—and want to see in the future—in their portfolios. For us, the rigor and power of the portfolio keeping is precisely in the analysis and the deep look that leads students to examine their histories and set goals.

Over the course of three years, we examined the reflective one-page summaries that 250 preservice and inservice teachers wrote about their portfolios. We gave no formal prompt; we simply required that each time they analyzed the contents of their portfolios, they wrote a summary reflection of the patterns they saw with a reflexive eye toward their goals. We saw five features emerge as we looked at these one-page reflections: “the stance,” “the gaps,” “the surprise,” the duet,” and the “mirror.” Portfolios offer a dialogic motion between who we are as teachers, who we were as learners, and how our current learning links the two. They also offer dialogic motion between reflection and reflexivity.

Literacy Stories in Portfolios:

Where the Individual Meets the Institution

One pre-service teacher, Evonne, takes a reflexive turn on her own history, discovers its process, examines the paradox she sees in its formation, and then asks how she can use it:

As I shared my portfolio with my colleagues, it provided an interesting insight. Basically, I am a fraud. My parents never let me doubt the fact that I was better than most everyone else. I went to school with that knowledge firmly implanted in my psyche. For the next fifteen years, a multitude of teachers went to great pains to convince me that my parents were wrong. Evidently, I’ve spend the past forty eight years trying to deal with that interior paradox.... But how do I prepare my students to go out in a world where their particular way of seeing may not be culturally acceptable? I fit the mold so perfectly and have always seen the need to do that which is socially, academically, and culturally acceptable. I need to remember that culture changes. More than anything else, the portfolio represents my emergence as a writer. In 1964, it was not acceptable to call yourself a writer until you’d been

published in a reputable vehicle. Now we recognize our one year olds' literacy. Maybe there is hope in our quiet education revolution/evolution. Maybe the world will find a place for every ability. Let them find themselves and they'll find their way in the world.

As Evonne discovers in her "interior paradox," a portfolio is a place where an individual meets an institution. In the current portfolio climate, conversation whirls over school settings, new alternatives, and students, but attention to teachers floats silently under it. As we write this article, educators across the country are recognizing the power of portfolios, but the link to school "assessment" is still a puzzle (Purves, 1993). School administrators and language arts teachers are turning to portfolios for a more comprehensive, internally valid picture of student competencies and performance (Porter & Cleland, 1995; Rief, 1992; Murphy & Smith, 1992; Sunstein, 1992; Yancey, 1992; Valencia, 1990; Polin, 1991; Wiggins, 1989; Wolf, 1988). State education agencies and national testing companies are experimenting with portfolios to bridge the gap between large-scale and classroom assessment in efforts to enhance—or replace—traditional testing procedures (Potts, 1996; Hewitt, 1995; LeMahieu, Gitomer, & Eresch, 1995; Bridge, et al, 1993; Freedman, 1991).

But portfolios can offer teachers more than institutional guidance, more than an alternative to traditional evaluations of our students' growth. They offer us a site for documenting our own growth, for researching our professional performance, and an alternative way for seeing ourselves in relationship to our colleagues, our students, and our literacy histories. In some teacher education programs, portfolios offer opportunities for students and their professors to define objectives, make connections between courses, identify reflective practice, achieve successful job interviews (Wolf, 1996; McLaughlin & Vogt, 1996; Olson, 1991). Developed throughout an entire teacher education program, portfolios mark a "rite of passage" as beginning teachers complete their preparation and enter the profession (Barton & Collins, 1993). Portfolios set our instructional goals as we examine our histories as learners (Sunstein & Potts, 1993; Sunstein, 1992; Hansen, 1992; Wolf, 1988). And, if we expect our students to learn from their portfolios, teachers need to keep them too (Graves & Sunstein, 1992).

All of these accounts—of students, teachers, and the portfolio themselves—mention the importance of reflection. Many recommend reflection as an important action toward learning, but only a few examine or describe the actual reflections themselves (Sunstein & Cheville, 1995; Yancey, 1992; Belanoff & Dickson, 1991). Reflections, as we write them with each new version of a portfolio, enrich our classroom vision, deepen our knowledge of ourselves as learners, and nudge us toward new goals for our students. But this recursive process is not only an act of reflection. Many times, it is an act of reflexivity. The difference between reflection and reflexivity is the objectification of the self (Babcock, 1980). "We become at once both subject and object. Reflexive knowledge, then, contains not only

messages but also information as to how it came into being, the process by which it was obtained" (Ruby & Myerhoff, 1982).

Reflexive Turns:

Five Features of Portfolio Analysis

As these teachers each discover in their own chosen ways, keeping and analyzing portfolios enables them over time to hold up personal stories for inspection, to categorize what they see. The act of reflecting on personal literacy portfolios can lead to an ongoing and recursive examination of knowledge and understanding. Like anthropological investigation, as we work inside the site for a longer time, an understanding of ourselves as learners and teachers grows. We've noticed the benefits of teachers categorizing and analyzing their stories in portfolios. As we and our teacher-students kept portfolios over six semesters and several methods courses, these categories seemed to emerge from our one-page reflections of our personal literacy portfolios:

Figure 1
Features of One-page Written Reflections of Teachers' Literacy Portfolios

<i>Feature</i>	<i>The Portfolio Keeper Notices:</i>	<i>Leads to:</i>
The Stance	Position in relation to the assessment.	Investment in and ownership of learning.
The Gaps	Underrepresented literacies.	Goal setting.
The Surprise	Substance, breadth, and depth of learning.	Identification of strengths and weaknesses.
The Duet	Connections between home and school literacies.	Comprehensive pictures of multiple literacies.
The Mirror	Self-development and growth in relationship to literacy context.	Reflexive theorizing.

1. The Stance

After several passes through her portfolio, the portfolio keeper notices her own position in relation to assessment. Who controls the contents? Who is judging the quality of the work? Whose notion of "importance" is reflected in the portfolio? And what does the term "best work" mean when she collects work to reflect her learning? In short, where does the portfolio keeper stand? She becomes more invested in her learning as she controls what she chooses to add and remove.

F. Dan Seger (1992), in *Portfolio Portraits*, describes three "stances" for the student portfolio keeper in current practice. In one kind of portfolio arrangement,

the student stands on the outside: a jury of assessors determines what the contents should be, teachers assist student production of contents, and then the jury decides whether (and how well) the student meets the requirements the jury has set. A second stance, perhaps more complicated than the first, offers the student choice of contents, inviting her to compile a portfolio to meet her own specifications along with the school's requirements. Although she is encouraged to comment on its contents and self-evaluate in a reflective essay, it is a jury of outside assessors who determine her portfolio's worth. This kind of portfolio implies that the student is a central player in assessing her learning, but the ultimate judgment of its quality does not belong to her. The jury sets the terms, attaches a fixed score, and compares her to others for whom learned culture and lived experiences are probably deeply different.

But in order for reflexive evaluation to happen, we believe, the student must take a third stance, and the portfolio must allow it. She must stand at the center of her portfolio, and she must be her own assessor, her own evaluator. She must determine how the contents of her portfolio reflect her objectives and goals. In short, she must articulate her learning standards as they meet the culture and the institutions to which she belongs.

Roger, a college junior preservice teacher, observes his stance as a long-time learner and a member of several school communities:

Before last semester I had never heard of portfolio in the classroom. I thought it was a pretty cool idea and I had a lot of fun putting mine together. However, I never really thought about the quality of my portfolio until last week. I fear that a lot of teachers who are new to the use of portfolios will use them incorrectly. They'll tell their students to put in their "best work" that shows their ability to write, read, spell, follow directions, eat paste, and so on. The kids will obviously put in the things they got the highest grades on. I did. To me that means the teacher is dictating what is the "best work" of the students. Well, what do the kids think? Is that their "best work" or what the teacher thinks is best? Probably the latter.... In my portfolio only a portion of the high grade papers are things I am actually proud of. So what does this mean? I need to revise my portfolio to find my standards. I need to make it a quality portfolio. I need to trim some of the fat.

Cherie thinks hard about the relationship of freedom to learning and writes in her one page analysis, "When I started my portfolio, I had dividers in my three ring binder labeled chronologically for each year I was in school.... With the removal of my dividers came the removal of my very structured commentary. The removal of these restraints made me feel free. I included some pieces at first I was going to exclude because they were depressing. I intended to include only positive pieces." Cherie's portfolio holds her instructive failures as well as her triumphs.

2. The Gaps

Selecting and organizing items can alert us to what is missing from the whole.

Noticing what we do not have represented in our portfolio can help us evaluate the critical influences in our literacy and alert us to new goals that we might set for reading and writing, speaking and listening. Juan, an eight grade language arts teacher, learned from the gaps in his portfolio that his family was another source of his literacy: "I kept seeing holes in the picture created by the portfolio. The search for items to fill those voices produced even more items for consideration. I realized I had nothing to represent my family, and that most of my time goes to school." Since then, Juan has made a professional portfolio and a personal one.

Another student, Carl, returning to school at age thirty, discovers another gap in his history as a student. His portfolio shows an array of literacies—from music for his bagpipes to his wife and daughter to poems he had written as a writing major—but nothing from his earlier years in school. Plagued by a lifetime of puzzling labels and low self-esteem, Carl questioned his abilities to "do school." One gap alarmed him when he shared it with his peers: "I finally verbalized why certain things were included or excluded. Among the most troubling aspect to those who reviewed my portfolio was the fact that it was devoid of any proof of my literacy prior to three years ago. According to the evidence displayed between the covers of my portfolio, my literate life did not exist prior to 1989. And in many ways it did not."

Rachel is a graduate of a prestigious college and a writer herself, working in a master's program and tutoring ESL students. Her portfolio at first was a tour through the literate life history of a successful student. But as a person preparing to teach, Rachel sees a gap, develops a goal, and meets it in less than six months: "One of the voids that I see in my portfolio is that of publishable writing on educational issues," she writes. By the next semester, she published an article about her ESL tutoring in a pre-service practicum with immigrant teenagers (Russell, 1993).

3. The Surprise

Hortencia is a graduate student, elementary teacher, reading specialist, and former Washington lobbyist. But she has always had a confidence problem about her reading and writing: "Although I never considered myself an avid reader or prolific writer and would never boast of this, I was surprised to uncover how much reading and writing I have engaged in throughout the course of my life.... I can trace my academic literacy through papers written as course requirements, article critiques, project proposals and a various assortment of other genres.... Together with my bilingual, political, and artistic works, I see that it is possible to display one's literacy 'story' in a portfolio."

No one from the outside would know that Hortencia's literacy confidence is so low, nor would anyone be able to counsel her about it. She needed to lay it out for herself and interpret its contents in order to see herself as the multi-literate person she appears to be. Julie, on the other hand, has much confidence as a student, but she discovers that she's devalued her personal writing. As a twenty-one-year-old

English major preparing to teach high school, her college writing had been traditional and successful, papers of literary criticism and literature review. Although she treasured these as symbols of her accomplishment, Julie sees that personal narrative is the genre which allows her a window into her learning: "As I was selecting pieces of writing for this portfolio, I discovered that my favorites were almost always personal narratives. I went back through and chose a more diverse spectrum of writing samples, but again I realized that seven of the twelve I have included focus on my life experiences."

Like Julie, Alicia is another English major. She surprises herself as she notices that her personal literacy moves fluidly through her academics, and the discovery helps her set goals as she moves from student to teacher:

The portfolio demonstrates that reading and writing are essential to my life. Literacy has been a part of my work, my leisure, and my schooling. I was somewhat surprised to discover the extent to which literacy dominates my personal life. Prior to this, I hadn't considered that my life would be altered if I didn't have my personal writing and reading.... One of my goals is to rework some of my personal writing, my poetry. I would like to take the time to include more works from favorite authors, some poetry or short pieces.... My feeling is that I can do more to personalize my portfolio to bring out more of my character.

4. The Duet

A poignant surprise for these teachers is the interrelationship of it all: reading connects with writing, private connects with public, histories connect with goals, school connects with home. The relationship between out-of-school and in-school literacy is a key to understanding how we learn. Acts of writing are acts of reading, and vice-versa. Although recent scholarship describes these connections to us, the portfolio is a place where we can interpret it in our own work. Randy writes,

I didn't really see the interaction in my portfolio until very recently. I knew I had a collection of things which demonstrated my various literacies (literature, music, etc.) but I didn't see the duet being performed. For nearly every piece of writing or performing there is a complementary piece of reading or decoding. My lyrics and the record of baseball games serves as a reading-made-writing. Music written by me is to be read by an interpreter. Stories about chess—a game written differently by each player at each game. These are couplets reflecting the duality of literacy, the unavoidable link between what we read and what we write, between what we write and what we read.

For us, Randy's term, "the duet," has come to signal such interrelationships. As a preservice teacher, he names his personal literacies and interprets them as they sit in his portfolio. Jenny, a high school teacher in her first year, comes to terms with her version of Randy's "duet." For her, the duet is tied to academic guilt, which leads her to re-think the system of assessment she met in her schooling:

After looking at my portfolio, I realize that I am a literate person. That is, if I expand my definition to include reading and writing of all types: writing letters, writing about personal experiences, crafting furniture with my hands, and, of course, what was always present, academic reading and writing. It is ironic, but I never considered myself a literate person. Not because I couldn't read and write. But because I didn't really love to read and write as English majors and English teachers are supposed to. So what does this say about the images we project? My experience tells me that literacy is defined by acts of reading and writing we do within the context of academia. It is not just reading and writing, but the values that we place on what we read and write. Literacy is something to be evaluated. These are the notions of literacy I am slowly beginning to reject. It takes a long time to undo what has been done.

Jenny and her high school students are currently working on defining a system to have their portfolios "count" as a part of their English grade without comparing them to one another.

5. The Mirror

To be "reflective practitioners," we need to be able to identify what it is that we do—where it came from and where it will go. As Jenny discovered while she investigated the source of her literacy guilt, reflection can lead directly to knowing how we apply who we are to what we know about educational theory, and why we "practice" education the way that we do. Turning our reflective practices outward achieves our reflexivity. When we study ourselves as learners, we can turn the mirror outward toward the students we teach. Here, Roberta and Virginia, two pre-service teachers, use their stories to theorize reflexively:

The portfolio led me to make some very important conclusions regarding the ways in which I hope to teach. Not everything needs to be graded.... I did most of my best work when I was not feeling the pressure of grades. Another important conclusion I came to is that not every student is going to be able to read well, or write well, or speak well. Different students will be strong in different areas, and as a teacher, I need to recognize these differences. (Roberta)

My specific interest in literature and the spoken word demonstrates the need to expand the definition of literacy. If students are taught that reading non-canonical texts still counts for reading and that oral discourse is comparable to the written word, those who don't see themselves as readers and writers might begin to realize that they are literate after all. (Virginia).

Extending Literacy Stories:

Breathing Life into the Curriculum

After several semesters of portfolio keeping, revising their personal stories many times with care and rigor, both Virginia and Roberta came to pedagogical knowledge through the stories bound in their artifacts. But Winston, working on his

first portfolio, was skeptical. In what John Dewey (1938) calls the “logical moments” of reflective practice, Winston feels a difficulty and locates it:

If you want me to sit here and applaud the idea of portfolios, you are crazy. I don't even know if they'll work. They may appeal to some students and completely bomb on others. Sure a little success here, or a little failure there, doesn't make or break an idea. But all I've read is pro-portfolio hype, from pro-portfolio hypsters.... It's like junk mail about the interest rate on your credit card; it's simply too good to be true.... Now, ask yourself: Why should we put the soul back into the curriculum? That is exactly what you are trying to do with this portfolio business. You are trying to breathe humanity back into students of the nation. And I, as a taxpayer and future teacher, will not stand for it. There is no place for humanity in the curriculum.

Winston's “logical moment” is an ironic reflection, but it voices his new position as an adult, a teacher, a citizen, and an educational theoretician as he meets the institution of school. In time, and with more portfolio reflection, he'll be able to further investigate his theories about humanity and the curriculum.

Portfolios are concrete products which bring into focus our abstract processes. Like scrapbooks, they are our personal cultural texts. We must understand them as dynamic creations, “texts of identity,” and rhetorical and performative life-reviews (Katriel & Farrell, 1991, p. 2). As students and teachers like Winston, Virginia, Hortencia, Carl, Rachel, and the others demonstrate their portfolios, their classrooms become sites in which they enact “verbal art” (Bauman, 1986). As trips to “the field” serve anthropologists, portfolios offer us tours through our lived experiences in the places we have lived them. Portfolio keepers, especially teachers, learn about how they—and those who surround them—shape themselves as language users.

The portfolio itself is an artifact which offers us a forum for formative evaluation. It is never finished. It displays a person's unique encounter with one point in time in her learning history. It cannot and should not be summative. Attaching a grade, a score, or a number is counterproductive. Such an act suggests sameness, it compares and competes with others' when the purpose is self assessment. The more detailed a portfolio, the more different it is from others. The more a portfolio keeper evaluates her literate life history, attaches names and categories to her learning, the more she can theorize about how literacy happens for her as a member of her own learning culture as it shifts in time and space. Such reflective analysis and reflexive analysis are rigorous processes which require observation, recollection, participation, analysis, interpretation, synthesis, and practice. Such rigor is not statistical; it is anthropological.

So teachers and students need anthropological lenses to examine personal literacy stories inside their portfolios. Anthropologists use the term “material culture” when they refer to the artifacts people use at a site of cultural exchange. The job of anthropology is to highlight differences, to show how individuals fit into the cultures to which they belong. And anthropologists use ethnographic tools to

describe and interpret what they see. Linda Brodkey (1987) calls this the "study of experience...The purpose of such a research style is to examine how in the course of dramatizing their own lives, individuals also fabricate a material culture" (83). As they examine the arrays of material culture in their portfolios, our teachers have put those anthropological tools to work (Sunstein & Potts, 1993).

We believe that teachers must keep portfolios to understand themselves and their curricula first hand. Portfolio keeping teachers can show their students that they are readers, writers, storytellers, and learners in the very work of their teaching. Our students need to see our literacies, in and out of school, now and earlier in our lives, if we expect the same from them. Analyzing what's in our portfolios can help us shape, track, chart, and document our literate histories. And those histories enable us to form goals.

The most important discovery of our research is not a surprise. In the reflective documentation, the learning takes place. And reflection leads toward reflexivity—looking forward to the goals which continue to form. Unless we allow our teachers in preparation to try, document, fail, reflect, catalog, analyze and document again, we can never expect it from our students. When we continue keeping portfolios over time, we become fiercely protective of our right to our own differences, our own literacies, our own stories.

A portfolio can highlight our differences as effectively as a test score highlights an average. But, without reflective analyses and reflexive eyes, we cannot expect our new teachers to understand any better than our old teachers do that there are multiple literacy stories lying—in multiple places, in multiple languages, in multiple disciplines occupying multiple cultural sites—inside each one of our multiple students who read, write, speak, and listen in our classrooms every day.

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