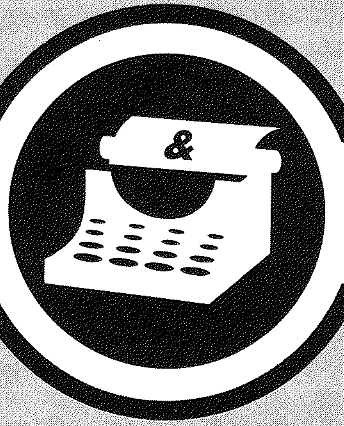
TEACHERS  WRITERS

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Vermont's Portfolio-Based Writing Assessment Program

A Brief History

by Geof Hewitt

AT THE HEART OF THIS STORY IS THE INEVITABLE tension in assessment programs between the need for measurement and a wish for professional development that leads to improved instruction. Advocates of assessment programs insist that a testing program is an essential tool in motivating improved instruction. "What you value is what you assess," they say. "Therefore, what is assessed will become part of the curriculum."

So in Vermont, long ago in 1988, committees of educators took the new Education Commissioner's call for a statewide assessment in writing and mathematics, and responded that standardized, objective tests would only perpetuate "teaching to the test" when the test, eliciting only a body of memorized knowledge, was arbitrary and would fail to show what our students can do. These committees challenged the Vermont Department of Education to design a plan for assessment by portfolio, possibly supplemented with a uniform task (e.g., a prompted, on-demand, timed writing sample) to confirm the validity of the portfolio assessments.

In the fall of 1988, the State Department of Education hired me as Writing/Secondary English Consultant. I came into the job skeptical of the notion one could devise a system that would judge students' writing samples fairly, or measure improvement of groups of students, but I took the job.

My first look at "assessment" came at a conference sponsored by the National Testing Network, a group of educators whose primary interest is writing assessment. I learned that "assessment is part of an ongoing conversation, not just a periodic score obtained through testing." I learned that in a fair assessment program, the rules and criteria are known to all participants well in advance of any formal evaluation.

I was distressed this new focus had not prevailed when I was a student in the 1950s, a time that still gives me occasional

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nightmares in which, rowed up with hundreds of classmates in a stuffy gymnasium, I finally break my pencil in frustration and march from the algebra examination with a strange sense of triumph. By a contemporary measurement system I might have been a damned good math student, encouraged to pursue the problems that have always interested me instead of being asked to solve numerical exercises where accuracy in unaided computation equalled success. So as little as I knew about testing, I had to place myself among those who say: "If a teacher is going to teach to the test, we might as well design a test that is worth teaching to."

Since Vermont's announced interest in assessing student writing is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each school's *writing program* and the state has no interest in collecting data on individual students, portfolios of the actual writing that a student does during the school year make much better sense than a test. As a means of ensuring some link with "traditional" testing, each fourth and eighth grade student would also submit a piece of timed writing in response to a uniform "prompt"—a single writing topic that all students would address.

The Vermont State Legislature is paying for this program, and the first year the Department of Education proposed assessment by portfolio, the legislators told department representatives that the plan was too hazy, possibly unrealistic. The department came back the next year with a detailed portfolio-based assessment system that would pilot in 1990–91 and go statewide in 1991–92. The Legislature allocated the funds.

I had arrived at my new job in the fall of 1988. In the spring of 1989 I was invited to put together a team of Vermont teachers who would design Vermont's portfolio-based assessment program. I wanted to assemble a committee of teachers who would accept the challenge enthusiastically. A small committee would ensure each member an opportunity for meaningful participation, but we needed the participation of teachers who represented the diverse groups of teachers that would be affected by our program. So I asked seven teachers with varied specialties—but a common interest in writing—to volunteer their time for three meetings. I was sure we could put together a credible recommendation after two or three meetings, and assured the committee members that we would adjourn well before the end of the school year.

By the end of my second meeting with the Writing Assessment Leadership Committee, I saw that meeting the deadlines would be a challenge. The committee members were just getting to know and to like each other: they talked a lot! I was slowly recognizing the importance of their social interaction. A stiff committee isn't going to dream very much. I was lucky to be working with people who wanted to meet more often than I thought was necessary. In June, when we had completed five meetings, I announced that we could resume in early September. "No," came the unanimous response, "there's a lot to be done and we need to meet throughout the summer—every three weeks." And these people were volunteering their time!

The meetings were often combative, but they were a joy for their intensity and frequent, necessary moments of levity. By summer's end, we had outlined a program: sixteen criteria for assessing a portfolio of either fourth or eighth grade writing that would contain, at the least, a student-designated "best piece" of writing, a letter from the student about the choice and composition of that piece, a piece of creative writing, a report on a public event or a response to some social or scientific phenomenon, and an example of writing from outside the language arts curriculum.

In the process of developing these basic guidelines, the committee participated in several policy battles with the Education Department's officer of planning and policy development, who supervised the development of all the department's assessment initiatives. "You mean entire portfolios will be part of the assessment?" asked the committee. "Assess a uniform, prompted writing sample, assess the Best Piece, but leave the rest of the portfolio for instruction purposes only." At the time, I was swayed by the persuasive skills of my fellow committee members, but two years later the enormous value of assessing the portfolios has become clear: students and teachers quickly internalize criteria when they consistently view their own and each other's writing through a common lens. And because of the assessment, teachers have an opportunity to glimpse what is happening in each others' classrooms.

Key to most policy debates was the committee's ultimate commitment to professional development and their view that the administration's principal interest lay in delivering data. It has turned out that half our budget has been reserved to provide teachers with access to one another as resources. Without the "measurement process," the program component that most engages teachers in isolation-breaking, face-to-face meetings, our professional development efforts would be without focus.

In September, 1989, the committee published a 20-page draft of its proposal, which included a list of the types of writing that would comprise a portfolio and the sixteen criteria by which this writing would be assessed. The booklet made several requests for responses, and allowed generous space for teachers to enter their comments. In other words, the proposal also acted as a questionnaire. We mailed 2,200 copies to Vermont's fourth and eighth grade teachers, their principals and superintendents, and to professional colleagues around the country. One hundred and seven responses (some coming from committees of teachers or even from entire faculties) helped us re-design the program. "Too many criteria!" most responses said. "Keep it simple!" So the committee went back to work, whittling and refining. Some criteria were discarded or combined: awareness of different audiences; logical thought sequence; understanding of prose or poetic structure; sentence/paragraph revision; editing for spelling and syntax; use of prewriting strategies; use of conferences; and other considerations that focused ever more intently on the writing program.

Five criteria, currently in place, emerged from our deliberations: purpose, organization, detail, voice/tone, and grammar/usage/mechanics. As frustrating to some Vermont teachers as our constantly changing guidelines may have been, the committee's position has been that the program needs to demonstrate enormous flexibility by responding to the experience of the educators and students who work with it.

The Vermont State Legislature awarded funds for the 1992 fiscal year, and we invited 600 representatives from our 144 pilot schools (approximately half the schools that would eventually participate) to Vermont's only central indoor gathering spot suitable for 600. As the teachers entered this cavernous room, they received heavy notebooks containing what we thought was all they needed to know about Vermont's assessment program. The teachers were talked at all morning, and the afternoon wasn't much better.

We learned our lesson and, as the year unfolded, the Department of Education planned smaller, regional meetings for teachers who were piloting the program. These teachers soon realized that the Department's stated intention of inventing it as we go was sincere: their experience in the classroom would continue to inform the development of criteria and guidelines for the 1991–92 statewide assessment. As teachers from neighboring school districts got together to discuss the teaching of writing, the same sort of social dynamic was building across the state that I'd witnessed in our tiny writing assessment committee. Although someone had told me that teaching is the world's most isolated profession, I had no idea what that meant until I saw the enthusiasm with which teachers share ideas, sentiments, and classroom strategies. I quickly learned that my services as an administrator are most valuable when they are invisible during the actual hours they have helped shape. Get the teachers together, then get out of the way. And take good notes.

More tension surfaced between the teacher-designers of the program and the people whose main concerns centered around data gathering when the Department of Education hired an independent contractor in the spring of 1991. The contractor would oversee the administration and evaluation of a uniform, prompted writing task and the accomplishment by Vermont teachers of the actual portfolio assessments. The contractor would also assemble and report the resulting data.

Some members of the committee distrusted these hired guns who came from out of state and seemed more comfortable with numbers than with the committee's insisted-upon language that would be used to describe (not measure!) each student's writing. For example, does the writing exhibit and maintain a sense of purpose? There are four possible answers: rarely, sometimes, frequently, and extensively. These four levels, indicating degree of accomplishment in each of the five criteria, would create a profile of each student's writing skills. A school's report would essentially be a chart showing the percentage of students who were assessed at each level of the five criteria. Using words instead of numbers to describe the levels of achievement would prevent newspapers' ranking schools on the basis of numerical averages. (The headline I'm dying to see: "Local School Ranks Highest in Voice!") Using adverbs instead of adjectives would help keep students from feeling that their portfolios (or they, themselves) were "unsatisfactory" or "good" or "excellent," and would keep the focus on the *act* of writing.

But the committee had avoided designing the uniform, prompted writing sample. Anxious teachers had been asking: "How can I ask my students to write to an external prompt in a timed situation when all year I've been teaching them 'the writing process'?" I don't know how much of this argument would have been defused if, at the time, I had been able to describe the prompt, at least in general terms. In March, when the committee finally met to discuss the prompt, a two-hour debate erupted over whether the prompt would be scored holistically or using the same analytic system we had designed for the portfolio and Best Piece, a debate that raged between the committee (analytic) and my supervisor (holistic—it won't cost as much as the complicated five-feature analytic system). Here's one the committee won, then quickly accepted a prompt suggested by the contractor: "Tell about a time when you felt happy, scared, surprised, or proud," a prompt that had been successful in other states and would work for both fourth and eighth grade students, who would be allowed up to ninety minutes to draft, revise, and edit their responses. In my opinion, the conditions under which the prompted "test" was administered (allowing access to thesauruses and dictionaries) approach the "real-world" situations under which some people are required to write. I have argued this point unsuccessfully with some teachers, who refuse to accept that deadlines and other time-constrained writing tasks sometimes involve an externally dictated topic and considerable violation of the principles by which some people identify "the writing process."

In any case, a prompted, uniform writing task is essential in establishing the credibility of Vermont's portfolio-based assessment system: the uniform writing assignment offers a "standardized" component to the whole program, a comparable task common to all participating students. The legislature and the public consider it a trusted, established way to assess writing, and the results can be used to verify the portfolio assessment.

When Donald Graves visited one of our committee meetings, I asked him what I thought was a loaded question: "Is the prompted writing sample necessary, given that research has already shown a high correlation between assessments of students' portfolios and their prompted writing samples?"

"Keep the prompt," Graves replied. "Keep it for just as long as it takes to prove itself redundant. Otherwise, you're going to have people screaming for a prompted piece or other standardized test to demonstrate reliability."

What I haven't resolved yet is whether, three or four years from now, we may face a situation exactly opposite from what Graves implied: people screaming to get rid of the portfolio assessment because the prompted piece gives an accurate enough assessment of how our students write. This suggests the same tension between the interest in professional development and an assessment program that simply delivers data. Our premise that some statewide test was inevitable and that "portfolios are a test worth teaching to" should be substantial enough to keep portfolio assessment in place, but the Achilles heel of such a program, which might be especially noticeable during lean times, is that portfolio-based assessment is not especially efficient: it is time-consuming and, on a large scale, requires the acceptance of a common standard by the many people who will act as readers. Yet within the "small scale" classroom, a teacher assesses the work as the portfolio develops, sharing observations with the student and, ideally, encouraging

the student to assess his or her own work on an ongoing basis. These practices, *in place of* the traditional correct-and-give-a-grade strategy, reduce the additional time involved in portfolio assessment. In any case, the extra burden of such a program applies more to statewide assessments, such as Vermont's, which involve reporting outside the classroom, than to small scale efforts, where the assessment of portfolios is restricted to the classroom or school.

Partially in anticipation of the criticism that statewide portfolio assessment is too messy and too complicated, our independent assessment contractor suggested that Vermont's teacher-designed writing assessment borrow from the British and Australian models, in which the classroom teacher assesses his or her own students' writing portfolios, then brings samples of those portfolios, with the assessment results, to central meetings where teachers' assessments are "moderated" (a process sometimes labeled, in the U.S., as "calibrated to a common standard"). This would train Vermont's teachers to use a common standard in assessing their own students' work, rather than having Vermont teachers go into each other's schools to assess the writing of children they have never met. It would also ensure that each student's work is assessed within the context of his or her own classroom, effectively linking instruction with assessment as parallel, if not synonymous, activities.

This plan required that we bring large numbers of student writing portfolios to a central place so that teacher committees could select "benchmark" pieces of writing to demonstrate each of the four levels of accomplishment in each of the five criteria. Publication of these benchmarks would provide models of, say, a "Rarely" in Purpose that might be assessed as a "Frequently" in Detail, etc. Once we had selected and printed the benchmark pieces, we could invite teachers to a central site where they would assess one another's students' portfolios and Best Pieces, in a gigantic portfolio swap. Two teachers would assess each portfolio, then each teacher, without knowing the results from this central session, would carry his or her students' portfolios back to the classroom and assess them independently. The teacher's assessment would be compared to the central-site assessments in an effort to learn how "reliable" his or her own assessment might be. We would probably not need this type of central assessment again, our contractor advised. Once we had used such a meeting to obtain baseline data that would then be compared to teachers' "at-home" assessments, we'd know what level of reliability to expect in future years.

Fifty fourth grade teachers gathered, each carrying approximately twenty writing portfolios, and after four hours of training spent the remaining day and a half assessing each other's students' portfolios. At the end of the same week, fifty eighth grade teachers spent two days doing the same thing. In groups of six or seven, each with a designated leader, teachers pored over stacks of portfolios. Two teachers assessed each portfolio independently, reporting their findings on spreadsheets that were then compared for discrepancies. If, under any criterion, two teachers' responses to a student's work varied by more than a single level, the table leader discussed their responses with them and moderated the assessments to the point where they were at least "adjacent." Reporting such results produced what is effectively a seven-point scale: Rarely, Rarely/Sometimes, Sometimes, Sometimes/Frequently, Frequently, Frequently/Extensively, Extensively.

The results of our experiment, when teachers returned home to assess their own students' portfolios (without knowing the assessments derived at the central site), were heartening, for a pilot year. The rate of *exact* correlation between the central site assessments and those reported by the classroom teachers was 55 percent, "not great—but a good start," according to the contractor. Better news was that, when we allowed adjacency, as we had at the central assessment, classroom teachers were in 100 percent agreement with the results of the large-group exercise. Detractors will point out that on a four-point scale, this unanimity is impressive, but not earth-shaking. It was certainly encouraging enough for us to plan a statewide program that did not require assembling all participating teachers for another portfolio swap. We could check their reliability by asking them to bring a small sample of portfolios they'd already assessed to a regional meeting for assessment by second readers.

A look at the results from Vermont's pilot year of writing assessment shows amazing consistency in the strengths and needs of fourth and eighth grade writers. In both grades, the prompted writing samples and the Best Pieces were found to be stronger than the portfolios as a whole. In both grades, no more than five percent of the students were found to write at the "Rarely" level under any of the criteria. More students' writing was assessed above the midpoint on our seven-point scale than below it. In almost all criteria, whether they were judged by the uniform piece, the best piece, or the portfolio, eighth grade students were assessed at a higher level than fourth grade students. Because these assessments were based on benchmark pieces that are specific to grade level, we should probably not expect that eighth grade students will always be assessed at a higher level than fourth grade students, nor should we claim that the results show how much our students improve as writers between grades four and eight.

What did we see when we collected 1,400 writing portfolios for random perusal in search of benchmark pieces, and then six weeks later assessed more than one thousand portfolios at our central assessment session? It's probably fair to say we saw the whole imaginable range of fourth and eighth grade writing. In classrooms where the program had clearly not been welcomed by the teacher, portfolios contained a grudging minimum of student writing, if any at all. What we found in these portfolios was a sheaf of worksheets and short-answer quizzes photocopied from workbooks. Fortunately, such portfolios comprised no more than fifteen percent of those we reviewed, but they served as a nagging reminder that, in spite of our emphasis on professional development, our message had not reached every teacher who participated in the pilot year's activities. We do not yet know exactly how these teachers react when they read portfolios from classrooms where writing is valued more highly than short answer worksheet drills, but two or three teachers did acknowledge to me: "I had no idea students were capable of such advanced work" (as that in the portfolios from schools other than their own). And, in the following year's review of portfolios, we observed a *dramatic* decrease (to close to zero) in the number of worksheets and

short-answer quizzes. The professional development resulting from such an exchange is, I think, just as valuable as the assessment results that our legislature wanted.

In a healthy majority of portfolios, we found at least the program's "suggested minimum contents." Not as many portfolios, but still a majority, contained work exceeding the minimum contents, and a good number of these contained work that vastly exceeded the minimum contents. Probably 250 of the portfolios that were lugged to the central assessment session contained so much work that a fair assessment of everything in them was impossible in the fifteen minutes allotted per reader per portfolio. In such cases, table leaders told the readers to review the minimum contents, and then randomly to sample as many other works as time allowed.

At first, assessing the portfolios was laborious because most readers would record five analytic scores for each piece in the portfolio and then seek to determine an "average" for the final profile. But once readers gained confidence, through experience, in their judgments, they ceased recording scores on a piece-by-piece basis and essentially derived a holistic sense of each portfolio for each of the five dimensions. We had budgeted our time, during each two-day assessment session, on the assumption that each portfolio would require thirty person-minutes (fifteen minutes per reader times two readers). What's wonderful is that we adjourned the fourth grade marathon an hour earlier than expected, and ran only ten minutes over schedule with the eighth grade assessment session.

As Vermont moves from this central site assessment model to assessment in the classroom, I worry that we are losing some of the marvelous camaraderie that developed during these two-day sessions, at which many teachers arrived skeptical, some with their arms folded across their chests, some even scowling. But halfway through the first afternoon, they were enjoying one another and were obviously engrossed in the portfolios. The opportunity to peer into another teacher's classroom was exhilarating: bursts of laughter permeated the assessment sessions, and an occasional group of teachers could be seen blinking away tears as they passed a piece of student writing around the table. At the fourth grade portfolio assessment session, a member of the writing committee who is a fourth grade teacher and had vigorously opposed the "process piece" during our design sessions because he thought fourth grade students are too young to write about the process of writing, came to me and said, "Boy, was I wrong! These letters they write about the composition and choice of their Best Piece are the best thing in the portfolios!" The value of teachers' seeing what other teachers' students write cannot be overstated.

Perhaps the most common observation among teachers at these central assessment sessions was that the most lively portfolios were those in which the student had been encouraged to explore the writing assignments without excessive teacher guidance. These exhibited the greatest sense of student ownership. Portfolios where the teachers had been so conscientious as to dot every *i* and point out every comma splice tended to have an assembly-line feel; because we were assessing portfolios in piles by classroom, it wasn't hard to sense a student's subservience to the teacher, writing as schoolwork exercise, as opposed to writing for self-expression or discovery. Although such portfolios were in the minority, they ran in batches, by classroom. About half the time, these "assembly-line portfolios" seemed to derive from too prescriptive assignments, an excessive insistence on following instructions, so that the students seemed afraid to write anything different from what the other students were writing. All the lecturing in the world, all the professional development sessions that have ever been held on earth, could never be as effective, I believe, as those teachers' seeing the work that was happening in classes where the teacher took a less perfectionist stance, possibly even writing with the students, possibly even keeping his or her own writing portfolio.

The week following these assessment sessions, the assistant superintendent from one district called me for some information. "By the way," she said, "three of my teachers came back from last week's assessment meeting and told me it was the most valuable professional development activity they've ever had."

Because our critics had suggested that adjacent scores on a four-point scale are not much proof of reliability, we asked teachers to meet a much higher level of agreement in our first year of statewide writing assessment, 1991–92. Bolstered by our relative success in achieving teacher agreement during the pilot year, this was the year that we would ask teachers to assess and report on all their students' portfolios, then to bring a sample of five portfolios to a regional meeting for review by second readers. A teacher's reported scores for all portfolios would be accepted if his or her scores on the five sampled portfolios were corroborated by second readers with fewer than eight points of difference. In the pilot year, a teacher might make one hundred decisions (five criteria times five portfolios times four levels of achievement) that were all adjacent to those of second readers and be found "completely in agreement." By the new rules, this teacher (assuming the second readers were found, themselves, to be accurate) would be judged in agreement zero per cent of the time. The new rules stipulated that only eight adjacent scores would be allowed before the teacher's scoring was judged discrepant.

It didn't work. Teachers' scores were discrepant so frequently that we could not determine whether the discrepancy lay with the first or the second readers. A front page headline of the December 16, 1992, *Education Week* announced "Serious Problems in Vt. Portfolio Program." The portfolio data we had hoped to deliver back to the schools, essentially a verification of what the classroom teachers had told us about their students' portfolios, could not be delivered with confidence, and we had to limit our report to statewide data.

We are now trying to sort out the possible points of weakness in our system. Is it simply a matter of more and better training? More time (three or four years?) for teachers to internalize the standards? A lack of consistency in our instructions to teachers? Do we need to lighten the load on teachers? Is such strictly defined teacher agreement even possible?

We are working on all the areas where improved procedures might make a difference. We are providing professional development through seventeen geographical networks, each with one or two network leaders who are classroom teachers. For this year, all networks are offering a standard set of scoring

exercises in three half-day sessions. A study committee is reviewing our criteria, and will make recommendations for descriptive language that is more precise than that currently in place. This summer, we'll hold a five-day scoring session where statewide data will be derived by eighty teachers, looking at just a sample of portfolios from each school. Through this highly controlled exercise, we'll be able to observe teachers making these hair-splitting decisions, and we'll be able to ask them, on the spot, what assists and what impedes the process.

Meanwhile, we are continuing to ask the classroom teacher to assess all of his or her students' portfolios, and we are inviting those teachers to exchange a sample of those portfolios with other teachers in their network. We'll encourage these teachers to share the results of their assessments locally, but we will report, as official data, only the results derived at our summer session, and take the lessons learned from that session into account as we refine the program for school year 1993–94.

Some teachers complain that insistence on "teacher agreement" is taking the place of sharing student work; our professional development sessions, this year, focus almost exclusively on scoring. At the same time, the Commissioner and our State Board believe that, as much as anything, this is an effort to foster equity across the state. It seems only fair that an "A" in Bennington should mean the same thing as an "A" in Canaan. Our hope is that, within two years, we'll be able to repeat—this time successfully—the assessment procedures we attempted in 1991–92.

Our assessment results, over the next few years, may answer some questions we have not yet addressed: are we holding our students (and ourselves) to a high enough standard? Is our four-point scale sufficiently discriminating? What will we do, once we return to our original plan, when a teacher's assessments are way out of line with those of other teachers at the moderation sessions? Is it fair to hold performance-based assessment methods to standards of reliability that were developed for objective tests?

And what is next, once we have worked out the glitches and created a useful and reliable system? I continually remind myself and the teachers that we should never "lock up" our system by chiselling its guidelines in stone: for the program to be useful, it must be forever responsive to the experiences of those who are asked to make it happen. The day we decide that we have the perfect assessment system is the day the program starts to die.

Will we be able to take the lessons learned from our experiences assessing writing and apply them to other disciplines, or at least to other areas of the language arts? Certainly this approach might be applied to reading, and possibly to speaking and listening as well. To reflect the growth and depth of a student's understanding of literature, a portfolio might contain student papers that respond to selected works. Such writing, collected at strategic intervals in an academic career, would surely show more about the student's progress as a reader, an *interpreter* of literature, than content-based, objective tests.

One strength of Vermont's system has nothing to do with the details or with the assessment itself: Vermont's teachers built the program from scratch. An increasing sense of involvement grew from teachers' responsibility for developing guidelines, writing criteria, and fighting policy battles. That the teachers on the design committee consulted their colleagues at every stage of the program's development and continue to listen to what teachers and students are experiencing, make me wonder: can there ever again be an off-the-shelf test that Vermont teachers and administrators welcome?

Even as we wrestle with the questions raised by our ongoing experiment, what are we getting from the program already in place? Teachers are becoming more and more intimately involved in the teaching and assessing of writing, their students are coming to understand something of what is expected of them, and a statewide conversation has begun: what is good writing and how does one produce it?

PLUG

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For more information about participating, contact Robin Burke Productions, 49-04 Vernon Blvd., Long Island City, NY 11101. Tel. (718) 392-7103. Fax (718) 786-6784.

Talking on the Pigback

Focus Groups at T&W

by Elizabeth Fox

IN 1990, THE ARTS PROPEL DRAMA TEAM INVITED Susana Tubert and Dale Worsley, two playwrights from T&W, and me to participate in a weekend Drama Assessment Workshop in Pittsburgh. Arts PROPEL, a five-year collaboration between Harvard University's Project Zero, Educational Testing Service, and the Pittsburgh Public Schools, was formed to explore teaching and assessment in the arts and humanities. The Arts PROPEL drama team's belief that assessment should be part of the process of learning rather than a single judgment that comes at the end of a unit is consonant with that of T&W writers and teachers of writing: the process of making decisions while writing and the formal and informal critiques of editors and friends all serve to help us improve our work.

Susana, Dale, and I spent most of the weekend in "Collaborative Assessment Conferences," a format developed by Steve Seidel and Reineke Zessoules of Project Zero for teachers, writers, and administrators to discuss student writing portfolios. Dale and Susana offered the Arts PROPEL drama team different aesthetic perspectives on their students' playwriting portfolios. Both sides profited from the dialogue. By the end of our trip, I was struck by how refreshed and energized the T&W team was. It turned out that assessing students' writing, when it meant learning more about the students by carefully reading their work, could be both delightful and rewarding.

When I returned to T&W, I was curious to know what would happen if T&W's writers got together to discuss a student's writing portfolio. Do writers value different qualities in student writing? Was there something different in the way professional writers talked about writing that could contribute to the way educators evaluate student work? Could writers bring more of an "aesthetic" angle to the discussion?

In 1991, we began to experiment by asking small groups of writers to discuss samples of their students' work. When we started the focus groups, our intention was to identify those aesthetic qualities that especially interested writers when they assess writing. Many of the qualities we noticed are listed in *Moving Windows* by Jack Collom, one of the texts the Arts PROPEL poetry team used to develop a vocabulary for assessing their students' poetry portfolios, qualities such as energy, candidness, understatement, concision, and "moves." During the meetings, the T&W writers rarely discussed a student's mastery of grammar, spelling, or penmanship. Instead, they appreciated risk-taking, honesty, and "voice"—the sense that the students are putting themselves into their writing. Rather than simply trying to please someone else, such students are able "to wrench out something that is of themselves," as novelist Jill Eisenstadt described it.

Early on, these meetings proved valuable to our writers' work in the classroom. Their experience with focus groups seemed to affirm the conclusion of the Arts PROPEL drama team that "teachers' insight grows from hearing the multiple interpretations and perspectives of their colleagues." This was probably the most commonly cited benefit of the discussions: the focus groups gave our writers-in-residence an opportunity to collaborate with each other, and gave them new ideas they could use with their classes. As poet Cynthia Shor noted, "Touching base with the other writers helps me as a teacher. Talking about the student's work validates my teaching and gives me new ideas. I came away feeling professional about what I do." Michael Schwartz spoke for many other T&W writers when he said, "These meetings confirm some of my impulses, help me hear what I'm doing, and give me a direction I may not have thought to go in."

T&W started out with focus groups discussing portfolios by individual students. The format we used was more or less the same as that of the Collaborative Assessment Conferences described in *Arts PROPEL: A Handbook for Imaginative Writing*. But over time we changed the format's questions slightly and condensed the format into a single sheet the writers could refer to during the meeting. We found that the ideal number of writers in a group is six or fewer. To each group we added two staff members, a "facilitator" to run the meeting and a scribe to keep minutes. The presenting writer distributed copies of one student's work. We've discussed portfolios that range from two sentences to many pages. We scheduled about an hour per portfolio.

The students' work varies widely. Some writers choose students who have severe writing problems. Others choose either an exceptionally talented student or a "typical" student from one of their residencies. The individual portfolio meetings have proved especially helpful to those writers who brought in work by a student who has trouble writing. The following is a summary of a focus group discussion about Derek, a sixth grade student in one of poet Cathy Bowman's classes, whose work exemplifies the acute writing problems of the other ninety or so students in her residency. The focus group included five other T&W writers: Kent Alexander, Carol Dixon, Stephen O'Connor, Cynthia Simmons, and Ping Wang.

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Focus on Derek

Step 1: Reading the student's work (15–20 minutes)

The writer passes out the student's work (arranged in chronological order) and tells the group the student's grade or age. The facilitator allows the writers as much time as they need to read the work carefully and to prepare their responses.

Piece #1

We love to read book and love to talking on the pigback and like to be me and the summer book and New York Knicks. Love the Empire state and Statue of Liberty, twin towers and South Street Seaport and the Statue of Liberty and cow and write Boker and Asia and Africa the bull and number 23 MJ love me to and love. The End by Derek of New Knicks and me save rope read Ba Liberty Baby Corky A. the Blind Seal and ABC Frazier. and the Pig back and cow head silently selection, Jam and my Brain and EsL and I finish. My midterm and we to the beach. and I love the Race Books help you grow. and I try Harder: By Nike boot. and I love Georgetown. and the End By Derek. Jordan I love to play basketball and I howeball and Brand. and the we try Harder.

Piece #2

my hair is like a oak tree and It is black

Piece #3

on the outside
I am care and fun to Be with on a
bike and on the summer and love sega and
love number #23 Michell Jordon and I
have black hair.

on the inside
I Don't like fight But If I have to I will
and I am Shy around girl and new people and
I am concerned about people only the poor and
Aids people and my family.

Step 2: Discussing the student's work (20 minutes)

Taking turns, each writer (except the presenting writer) addresses the following questions: What do you value in this student's work? Do you think the work is truly important to this student? What do you think this student is working on in his or her writing? Has the writing developed? What evidence in the student's work can you find to support your opinions?

During this step, the facilitator's role is to keep track of time, allow each person to speak without interruption, and remind the speaker to refer back to the student's work to support what he or she is saying.

STEPHEN O'CONNOR: I certainly see a progression. In this first paper there's a sort of spilling out of words and affections. The second one is much more controlled. The handwriting's very different, for one thing. In the third piece he's much more organized. I value the honesty of "Shy around girls." These are very private things that he's revealing.

I value the surprises like "My hair is like an oak tree," and the succession of "We love to read book and love to talking on the pig back." Although I value the surprises in terms of a reading experience, I'm not sure that they represent the kid's intention to surprise or the kid's control over the medium. His mind seems to be full of ideas and things popping out of his head. It's good he's getting them on paper. Even though he keeps writing "The End," he keeps going.

CAROL DIXON: The first piece seems like a struggle. The thing that stood out for me was the way he starts out saying, "We love," but he keeps coming back to himself. By the end there are quite a few *I*'s. But the "I" section is also filled with these commercials, like "Books help you grow" and "I try harder." It seems that these things are being imposed on him. Someone's saying, "Try hard, kid. Books help you grow." He's not quite buying that stuff, but he's spitting it back. In the second piece it seems like he just discovered himself. "My hair is like an oak tree and It is black." For the first time he's focusing on himself. The last piece is free of commercials. I think it's the most revealing piece. I like this kid.

In the last two pieces, I get the sense that he's got something to say and he's going to say it. In the first piece I think he's giving what he thinks someone wants. In the last two pieces he's giving what he wants to give.

CYNTHIA SIMMONS: I wasn't sure whether the first piece expressed something from him, or what he thought people wanted to hear. The thing that threw me was "I love the Race Books." The fact that he was talking about race books made it very specific and took it out of the commercial range. The second one is very personal, but it's such a strange reference to your hair being like an oak tree. It's a startling image, but personal. Is the writing important to him? Yeah. This first one is written as an assignment. But by the last one, it becomes important because he starts exploring himself. I notice a development in his writing. In the beginning it was scattered all over the place, but by the end it's much more focused and concentrated.

KENT ALEXANDER: This first piece is like a rambling conversation that he's trying to fit into a form. Because he talks about Baby Corky A., the Blind Seal Jam, Brain—the whole thing about "Pig back and cow head"—these seem to be the names of his friends. In the second piece, the oak tree seems like something from a song. The thing that popped into my head when I read it was the Bob Marley song, "We Are the Big Tree." I'm wondering if this kid listens to reggae. If not, he's way out there.

There's this thing of what Carol calls commercials. It probably shows what's going on in his life—that sort of commercial of peers and friends and Michael Jordan. In the midst of all this stuff is a little boy who's trying to figure out who he is.

This whole last piece is so perfect to the form. You can see what the assignment is: on the outside/on the inside . . . He set it up the way it should be. He's got big fat periods. He's really trying hard here. To me, his work is important to him because

he's really trying to fit into a form. I think the way he translates writing onto the paper has developed. But the sheer joy of going apeshit in the first piece is lost to the format in the third piece, which looks good, but there's a coldness to it.

PING WANG: I agree. In the first piece all the words and images seem exuberant. It's full of energy. Some of that has been lost in the other pieces. The range of his thinking is very far—"Statue of Liberty" to "South Street" and a "cow"—and extremely free. In the second piece he focuses on one image. It's an incredible image to me. An oak tree is not black. Somehow he trusted the first image—he said, "My hair is like a oak tree." But again, oak trees should be green. Then he makes the oak tree like him—an oak tree is black—jumping back and forth between the images. He's jumping around from outside to inside.

Step 3: Presenting writer's response (about five minutes)

The presenting writer talks about what he or she heard, and what he or she agreed or disagreed with. Is there any information about the student that would challenge or confirm the others' impressions? Is there any issue or concern they missed?

CATHY BOWMAN: I heard people say that the kid is struggling with his identity, is trying hard. Everyone loved the tree image. Everyone sees he's developing. I thought it was interesting that some of you thought the third piece was more revealing, that he was working to reveal himself, and that he was trying to please in the first one. The first piece really is, in a way, more about him. Even though it's all commercials, the pattern and the language and the texture of the language seem to me more Derek. The third piece is more like, "Okay, I'm going to write a proper little poem," even though the content is really personal. I wish there was a way to bring this exuberance and joy in language in the first piece to his other writing. I'd like to see him blend the first and second poems. Derek is very exuberant and has lots of energy in the classroom, but he has a hard time when he sits down to write.

Step 4: Colleagues offer suggestions (about ten minutes)

Each of the writers offers suggestions about what he or she would do to help the student develop as a writer.

STEPHEN: Maybe what he really wants to do is become more organized, and maybe you should just give in to that. On the other hand, you could give an assignment that made everyone in the class write crazy things. I sometimes read the kids *Tender Buttons* by Gertrude Stein. I ask them to write four or five sentences that don't make any sense at all.

CAROL: I might give him early Don L. Lee or e.e. cummings so that he can see that there's a way to get chaos down on the page. You have to show him ways that chaos can be molded. I'd expose him to "formless" pieces and maybe even have him listen to some on tape. He might be working on some sort of internal rhythm you don't understand.

CYNTHIA: He's got a lot of energy and he needs to shape it better. I think I'd try music. Some of the beebop music might be good because it's so "out," but still has a form and a rhythm. This is where he seems to fit—with musical forms more than with writing forms.

KENT: I have a couple of suggestions. One is to have the class take a few deep breaths before writing. This relaxes them and separates before from now. Then I might have him write about Michael Jordan—a story about how Michael Jordan feels on the outside and on the inside, or what would happen if Michael Jordan took him to see a basketball game. I might also try using a tape recorder. Have him write something, record it, and then play it back so that he would hear what it sounds like. That might help him edit himself.

PING: I would have him take out images and then read them. I'd have him pour them all out and then put them in some kind of order.

Step 5: Conclusion (about five minutes)

The presenting writer states what he or she learned from the session: Were there any surprises? Did the discussion raise questions about how he or she works with his or her students? We then end the sessions with an open discussion. We discuss anything we didn't get a chance to talk about before—the meeting itself, for example: was it productive? Should we modify the structure?

CATHY: The suggestions were helpful, especially the one about using Gertrude Stein—also using music, writing about athletes. It was all helpful. I have such a hard time with Derek in the classroom. He's a great kid. He's so energetic, but he's hard to control. He wants to work, but when everyone sits down he doesn't write. The classroom is very chaotic, and I'm there after lunch. Talking about Derek's work helps me like him more.

Cathy told me later that when she returned to the school she brought a tape recorder and music by Miles Davis. First, the students read an excerpt from Davis's autobiography, about his first memory. Then Derek helped her find the only working electrical outlet in the room. As soon as he heard the music, he beamed with pleasure. Listening to it, he wrote three pieces, including one about his earliest memory.

Over these past few years, we've examined and reexamined many aspects of the focus group format. A few of our writers felt that without some background on the student whose work will be read, they'll misinterpret the work. Some found the format too restrictive: they wanted more time to talk during each step, or more of a chance to discuss the work together rather than take turns. Others liked the formality of the meetings because it gave everyone a chance to speak. Poet Cynthia Shor remarked, "Having everyone say something about the poems

makes you think. You dig more and you give more. I find that helpful." Others liked the format because "it moves things along and keeps things focused."

The key seems to be to create a meeting in which everyone can speak and be heard, in which no one dominates the discussion. Sticking to the format also helps insure that the meeting doesn't go on too long. Nonetheless, the facilitator should be flexible. When it seems the group needs more time, it's good to allow for more open discussion between steps.

Several writers suggested that the meetings might be more helpful if they more closely reflected a real residency. This year I modified the format by focusing the discussion on work from one class produced in one period. The presenting writer thus selects a cross-section of work from his or her class, including examples from the best students, average students, and least responsive students.

The format is much like the one we use for individual student portfolios, except that in step 2 the other writers consider each piece as if they were in a classroom responding to an individual student's writing. We've also changed step 4 to a group discussion instead of taking turns, and in step 5 all the participants now address the questions individually.

The following is a summary of the discussion from one of our first "class portfolio" meetings. The discussion centers around a quality of good writing that is one of the most elusive and most highly valued by our writers—the sense that the student is speaking in his or her own way. The students' work is from a seventh grade class taught by Tom Riordan. The participants were Kent Alexander, Carol Dixon, David Mills, Sam Swope, and Riordan.

> Should I walk over and talk to them? Should I be friends with them? It will be very difficult. They must think I'm a crazy man because of the way I look. I look as if I'm a criminal with no home. They appear to be afraid of me. I think the more I look at them, the more they get scared. They may want to beat me down if they see me walking towards them. They may think that I'm after them, so they will defend themselves. Why can't people accept me for the inside, not from the outside? They may look at me and say, "There goes a dirty old bum looking for some food." I look at them and think how nice it would be to have someone to talk to. Someone that I can share my feelings with. But for now, I will just look at them and imagine that I am talking to them and sharing my feelings. I think that would be better.
>
> *—Marcia*

> Oh. Look at me. I am different from everyone. Look at my hair, my face, my feet, my hands, my fingers. Oh boy. Look at me. Ugly me. Oh boy. I wish I were like them. Look at her nice hair, pretty feet, nice hands. Oh boy. I wish I were like them. Look at them. Nice clothes, good looking. Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy. Look. Just look. Can't you see? Just look. Look. Can't you see I am different and I will always be?
>
> *—Karen*

> I hope those girls ain't thinking anything bad about me. Because I do look kind of shabby and I'm old and I'm always walking along the beach looking suspicious from their point of view. Besides, they're young. Maybe they don't understand. OK, if they come on the beach another day, maybe I can beg them some food. The reason why I didn't beg them food a little earlier is that I'm nervous to just go and beg a couple of young girls some food. If I just step up to them, they will be really scared and start thinking that I'm a murderer. You know what? Forget it. Maybe they'll see me again coming up to them and run to their parents, and then their parents sees me and kills me or something.
>
> *—Chuck*

> Goodness, don't these children have a home? They are always looking at me for no reason. I'm tired and annoyed and I got two little brats looking at me. Terrible things they do all the time. Kids are just trouble and always want you to have time for them. Ah well, what do you want? Why do you look at me? I wish I could break their necks.
>
> *—Ronnisha*

> What are they thinking? Why are they thinking? I'm no killer. Don't look at me like I'm a killer. They look frightened at me like I'm the killer. They are the killer.
>
> *—Kenisha*

DAVID MILLS: Overall there's a pronounced sense of alienation in these pieces, an undertone of violence. They all lack detail. There's a bland quality to them—they're too easy. I did start to have a sense of the person in Chuck's piece. The language there is more unique.

KENT ALEXANDER: I liked Marcia's, Karen's, Ronnisha's, and Kenisha's because in them there's a sense of the writers jumping out of themselves and getting into another character. In Marcia's I liked "They appear to be afraid of me. I look as if I'm a criminal." I love the anger in Ronnisha's: "Two little brats looking at me." In Kenisha's the sense of paranoia is amazing: "They are the killer."

SAM SWOPE: I agree with Kent. I felt Chuck's was the least successful. I can see what David was saying in terms of language and thought. I love the sense of the interior conversation. You have a sense that they're talking to someone. In Karen's, there's a manic quality of all the "Look . . . Look . . . Look, what do you see?" Who is she talking to? They all end with a dramatic punch.

CAROL DIXON: Overall, I liked the different voices. They are all very distinct. I thought they were trying to get into the head of another character. In Marcia's, she got there a little bit, but "Why can't people look at me from inside?" is predictable. The writer is avoiding the character somewhat. When Karen writes, "I wish I were like them," I think it shows the imposition of how she thought the character *could* feel. Chuck got into his character a little more. "Besides, they're young" shows he wasn't completely empathizing with the character. "Kids are just trouble and always want you to have time for them." Ronnisha got completely inside the character. There was no interference from the writer. It's the strangest one, considering the neck breaking. Kenisha's seems completely in character.

TOM RIORDAN: It was interesting to hear from David all that's missing from the stories. I heard Marcia's cautiousness. She

didn't want to get too deep into this. You talked about Chuck's style. He's a stylist, always interested in language. Ronnisha seemed to be in character most completely. I hadn't noticed before how the last lines had some punch. I agree with everyone. I had read my students, by the way, part of "The Verb to Kill" by Luisa Valenzuela, a story about two girls walking along a beach. One of them is thinking the story and projecting her fears about the homeless man walking toward her. I had asked the kids to take the point of view of the homeless man in the story.

For the next ten minutes or so, the writers discussed different strategies Tom could use in his class. Carol wanted to know how Tom could have set up the lesson to help the students get beyond their static ideas about homeless people. Kent suggested that Tom "have them sketch a biography of the homeless man, to get a real human being with a life." Several people suggested that Tom use the character exercises in Daniel Sklar's book *Playmaking* as a complement to the exercise. Carol suggested that Tom could have the students continue the Valenzuela story and find their own endings for it. Kent suggested Tom could try a change, such as "It starts to rain, what happens next?"

At the end of the session Tom talked about what he'd learned: "I learned some other ways to flesh out stories and characters and how to describe what this exercise produced and what it didn't do." Kent added, "It's incredible to listen to someone with an entirely different perspective. It really makes you re-think your position."

As we continue to experiment with focus groups, we hope to add teachers, school administrators, and students to our meetings. The drama team of Arts PROPEL concluded that their Collaborative Assessment Conferences "are not efficient as procedure for the evaluation of every student's work. However, as a regular practice, they enable teachers to develop the expertise they need to become acute observers and helpful judges of students' learning . . . [and] hence provide the foundation for assessing portfolios."

Both the individual and class portfolio focus groups serve many purposes for the writers, students and teachers we work with. Already some T&W writers are using the format with the teachers they collaborate with during their residencies. Josefina Baez said that the focus groups were a "great help in doing editing with teachers." Charlotte Meehan recently wrote, "I'm teaching freshman English at Brooklyn College, and have borrowed the focus group format in directing my students' close reading of each other's essays. It has given them a strong sense of their own critical powers, and they love it."

There are many reasons for seeing imaginative writing as an integral part of learning—writing can bring joy to the classroom, provide a different way of learning that includes students who are otherwise left out, give children writing skills they can use for the rest of their lives, and help them solve problems and think about their lives. But these benefits become possible only when a student is using his or her imagination in an act of writing that is an act of communication rather than a school assignment. When we look at Derek's writing skills—grammar, spelling, etc.—we see a discouraging number of deficiencies. However, when we look at his work with aesthetic criteria in mind, we get a much better idea of how he thinks and what interests him, and we can tell when he is expressing himself and when he is simply trying to please the teacher. We see what he *can* do rather than what he can't do, and what we can do to help him become a better writer. As T&W playwright Daniel Judah Sklar put it, "The process dignifies the student—takes him or her seriously." This use of evaluation, which is based on how writers learn to write, serves both teachers and students. Because the discussions approach student work as art, they make assessing it an enjoyable process. At T&W, discussing the aesthetic issues in our students' work keeps us in touch with what we love about teaching and about writing.

If you would like to experiment with focus groups, simply ask a few of your colleagues to join you. It would be helpful to have at least one writer in the group. All of you don't have to have the same sensibility. In fact, the wider the range of aesthetics and taste, the better.

For some background information, you could start by looking at the description of Collaborative Assessment Conferences in *Arts PROPEL: A Handbook for Imaginative Writing* (Arts PROPEL, 1993)* and the assessment procedures Patricia Carini describes in *The School Lives of Seven Children: A Five-Year Study* (Grand Forks, ND: Univ. of North Dakota, 1982)**. Take the ideas you like and make up your own format. Then tinker with it until you and your colleagues like the way it works. For a more complete discussion of the roles of facilitator and scribe, you may want to look at *Making Meetings Work* (New York: Jove Books, 1982) by Michael Doyle and David Strauss, a book that is currently popular in business and used by New York City's School-based Management teams. Finally, *Moving Windows* by Jack Collom and *Reading Your Students* by Anne Martin (both published by T&W) have helpful advice on recognizing aesthetic qualities in student writing.

* Send a check or purchase order for $20 to: Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 323 Longfellow Hall, Appian Way, Cambridge, MA 02138, Attn.: Katherine Greenwald. (Discounts on orders exceeding ten copies.)

** Available for $7.50 (add $1.25 for shipping & handling) from: North Dakota Study Group, University of North Dakota, P.O. Box 7189, Grand Forks, ND 58202–7189.

Is It Good, and How Do You Know?

Evaluating and Assessing Your Students' Poetry

by Ron Padgett

ARE YOU GOING TO EVALUATE THIS SENTENCE? You just did, at least in the sense that you had an immediate reaction: you were probably pleased by its cleverness, annoyed by its trickiness, or perplexed. Are you going to give it a grade? Of course not, just as you don't give grades to your students' poems. You haven't had to. But now that more and more schools are experimenting with the assessment of writing portfolios—of which poetry usually forms a part—the problem of evaluating imaginative writing has returned, and solving it seems harder than ever.

Good writing teachers know that assigning grades to imaginative writing is misguided and counterproductive. But most of them also know that students want and deserve some kind of a response, and that sincere praise and encouragement—with perhaps an occasional, tactful suggestion for improvement—work best for most students. That's generally a good approach, but can we leave it at that? How do we know that what we praise is in fact worthy of it? How perspicacious are our evaluations? What aesthetic assumptions and biases do we bring to what we read? Is our taste narrower than it should be? Could it be broadened? Are there new evaluative techniques we don't yet know about? Can portfolio assessment teach us something new about evaluating imaginative writing?

In order to discuss these and other questions, Teachers & Writers Collaborative recently sponsored a conference whose seemingly innocent title ("How Do You Like My Poem?") expressed the crux of the matter: not only "What do you think of my poem?" but also "What's the process by which you judge my poem?" The conference was organized by Geof Hewitt [see his article in this issue] and overseen by him and Gary Lenhart, a poet and associate director at T&W. Twelve highly motivated writing teachers—one elementary and eleven secondary—met in Montpelier, Vermont, with Geof and Gary (and two scribes, both of whom teach and write) for two very full days to discuss the evaluation and assessment of student poetry. The conference took place in Vermont, partly because that state is in the vanguard of the portfolio assessment movement, and we at T&W were wondering about poetry's role in the new system.

Not surprisingly, it turns out that poetry is once again the toughest literary nut to crack, because poetry generates a wider range of reactions than fiction, plays, and nonfiction do. But these other genres are difficult too. Get eighteen intelligent, highly literate people in a room, have them all read the same piece, and then don't be surprised if they have quite different reactions to it. To give you a sense of this, I've selected two pieces discussed by the Vermont conferees. Take a moment now to read "Epic of a Woman" by a high schooler and the untitled paragraph by a twelve-year-old [see box on the next page]. After you've read them, rate them as L (liked), D (disliked), or C (confounded me). (By the way, these L/D/C ratings were devised simply as a way to get the conversation rolling at the Vermont conference. They are not part of Vermont's statewide writing assessment method.)

The conferees, arranged into two groups, gave "Epic of a Woman" three L's, one D, and four C's. They gave the prose piece four L's, three D's, and one C. In such cases, is it reasonable to think we are ever going to get anything near a consensus? It wasn't until the eighteenth poem that the conferees found one they agreed on unanimously: they all disliked it. But even then, Hewitt found two very nice things in it.

Should we worry so much about consensus, or even about assessment? It is tempting to say, as several teachers did, that because classroom time is so limited, we should be spending less of it assessing our students and more of it inspiring and encouraging them. Perhaps an even more extreme position was taken by one speaker at last year's NCTE convention, who said that his response to a student's poem is usually to read it and simply say, "Hmm." Such minimalism might help some college students, but it baffles and discourages younger writers. Besides, since we invariably do have reactions to the poems we read, why not give students the benefit of those reactions?

The whole matter of responding and evaluating is quite thorny. For instance, again and again the Vermont conferees pointed out that they really have two different types of reaction to student poetry: developmental and aesthetic. In class, they praise a poem when it shows an advancement on the part of the author, even though the poem itself might not be very good. Responding is further complicated by the fact that teachers should be judicious and tactful: rarely can they (or should they) say everything they think, especially about writing they don't like (see Peter Sears's article, "What Do You Say about a Terrible Poem?" in *Teachers & Writers* magazine, vol. 16, no. 5). They have to be diplomatic because, after all, it's not a spelling test or true/false quiz they're commenting on; sometimes it's the earnest expression of a vulnerable child's feelings. But for the sake of argument, let's assume that you are an ideal

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Epic of a Woman

Pandora,
shame hems your lips
men took you
for their craftier experiment.

Lilith,
demon to demon
your power sits simply inside these women
like a soft-ticking clock
we don't know is there.
To mine that gold!

Centuries in between
erase such power
and separate us now
from them.
But their pride—
their youth—
it is enveloping.

Yet our trophies sag.

—High school student

One more game! We've just got to win. You know we've played a lot of games. Wow! We went to McDonald's. I love to go to McDonald's! I love clowns, my favorite thing to do is to honk their red noses. I'm going to be a ghost along with my friends this year. I sure hope no one eggs my house this year cause I don't want to scrape eggs off my house! My house is old! We're always fixing it. That's why I never have any friends over. I have lots of friends but sometimes they do stuff I don't like. But then we become friends again. This year my birthday's on Thanksgiving which is on November 26 so write it down in your assignment book. Sometimes it really sucks to have your birthday on a holiday because you can never have a party! I love presents! Usually I get Barbies for presents because I collect them. Remember I collect them, not play with them! I have a Ken doll worth $65.00. He's really ugly! That's what I am, ugly, but I don't care because I'm not really interested in boys in that way. Everybody thinks I like someone, so if you do, get it out of your head! I think it's really sick how some of my friends go koo-koo over boys. I love sports. Some girls hate to do sports because they get all sweaty. Well I've got two words for them: USE DEODORANT!

—Twelve-year old student

teacher, able to adjust your responses perfectly to meet the needs of each and every child, no matter how different they might be. What makes you think your evaluations are in fact accurate?

After the Vermont conference, one teacher said that now she is more aware of "the importance of recognizing the subjectivity of our responses." If you're in a good mood, a certain poet who only yesterday seemed flat can now seem quite wonderful. In my teens, when I discovered e.e. cummings, I was very excited by the look of his poems; a few years later they seemed old hat; and a few years after that I found them beautiful and inspiring again. The transactional nature of reading poetry tends to make our responses as much a measure of ourselves—our moods, our sense of the beautiful, our needs of the moment, our experience in life—as of the poetry itself. How often do we dismiss certain poems as uninteresting, when in fact they seem so only because our taste is not developed enough to allow us to see how they work? It is not uncommon for well-known literary experts to have differing views of the same work; and even when they agree, the judgment is only temporarily secure. For various reasons, a writer's reputation can go into a steep decline. Think of Shakespeare, relegated by eighteenth-century England to the second rank of poets. We find that shocking, but with the entire literary canon now in question, it's not impossible that future centuries will agree with the eighteenth. So if entire centuries can be "wrong," why expect one individual to be "right"?

Therein lies the problem, or one of them: teachers are under pressure to do things right, which is one of the reasons that assessment of the mechanics of student writing (spelling, usage, etc.) is rather comforting, if tedious. Grading essays or book reports, teachers have a relatively firm idea of standards. But the more subjective the teacher's response, as it must be with poetry, the less useful are notions of being right and wrong. In encouraging our students to write imaginatively, we tell them to feel free, that there is no right or wrong way to do it. Why don't we allow ourselves the same leeway when we read their work? Because we are accountable, even more than our tested and assessed students.

The challenge for teachers now is to come up with new ways of evaluating students' imaginative writing that are perceptive, helpful, honest, and humble. The C (confounded me) category allows for humility in the face of the perplexities of poetry. Students are reassured by a teacher who knows all the answers, but they are even more deeply reassured by the teacher who is honest enough to admit, "I just don't know." It's a shame that the question mark has never been allowed as a grade, and that it's not part of writing portfolio assessment systems, at least those I've seen. Fortunately, we can use it in talking with students, and we should use it frequently when examining our own standards of taste and excellence. We should always leave room for the possibility that our assessment of any given poem is provisional, subject to revision, like the poem itself. We should read every poem expecting to like it, dislike it, or both, or perhaps to be stumped by it. Furthermore, we should be willing to wonder why we felt those ways. What should follow "I don't know" is "Let's try to find out."

Most teachers, after getting to know their students, find it easier to evaluate their poetry from a developmental point of view than from an aesthetic one. For example, you can generally tell when a student makes a breakthrough, a major leap forward. The leap may consist of a student's simply putting pencil to paper and writing his or her first poem, maybe even first sentence. The leap may be in terms of the student's taking on some new and

Photo: Andrew Kline

T&W's Vermont mini-conference

challenging content. It may be in terms of technique or style—the student who suddenly seems to know, and not just intellectually, what a metaphor is. Or the leap may consist of a student's realizing that now he or she really likes to write. The leaps may be big or small, but for most teachers they are obvious evidence of development.

Aesthetic evaluation is another matter. The student who writes his first sentence might come up with "I see a cat." The student making an emotional breakthrough might write "I am sad." The student discovering metaphor might write "The sun is a yellow ball." The student enjoying writing may pour out page after page of mediocrity. Thus there can be a dramatic divergence between the teacher's developmental and aesthetic views of a student's writing. Add this to the problems inherent in any aesthetic evaluation, and you have a daunting confusion of ideas and feelings. In a slightly different context, Geof Hewitt wrote that "to suggest that a piece be composed 'for the portfolio' is to impose notions of high quality on an act that should be exploratory ('risk-taking') in nature." Might we not apply the same idea to the assessment of students' poetry? Do we really want to read student poetry "for the report card"?

This is where the let's-try-to-find-out attitude comes in handy. For the past several years, T&W writer/teachers have been meeting in "focus groups," to discuss their students' work [see Elizabeth Fox's article in this issue]. These focus groups have turned out to be enormously helpful to writer/teachers who have been struggling with problems of assessing their students' work and, in light of that, of helping the students improve their own writing. One of the first things the writers agreed on was that "blind" assessment is too limiting. Although this New Criticism method has its uses, it disallows any discussion along developmental lines, and it forces assessors to make aesthetic evaluations that are erroneous. For instance, what might be considered a "slick move" by a second grader would be far less interesting if the author turned out to be a high school senior. (Literary critics often make a similar allowance for the writer's age and experience, in generously praising a new author's work as "promising," when they would be far less indulgent if it were that author's third or fourth book.) Or the "move" might be so slick as to be an obvious mistake on a second grader's part—such as a spelling error that resulted in an unintentionally brilliant twist, as one of Kenneth Koch's elementary school students did by writing "swan of bees" instead of "swarm of bees."

But the greatest value of the focus groups has been that they simply get writer/teachers together to talk about their students' work—an event more rare than it ought to be—thus giving them a better sense of *how* to talk about it. Gradually they are defining a vocabulary that helps them describe not only what is going on in their students' poetry, but also inside their own heads as they read it. In many ways, these focus groups

have much in common with the groups of teachers who have gotten together to hash out the writing portfolio assessment system in Vermont, as well as the teachers who took part in T&W's conference. Most participants emerge from these conversations with a renewed energy and buoyancy. Teachers at the Mont-pelier conference commented: "I enjoyed and appreciated meeting teachers who do their best for children." "The dialogue has been challenging, interesting, and fun." One teacher said that he appreciated "the richness in different points of view." In most cases, meeting with colleagues and trying to answer the unanswerable is useful and satisfying in ways we hadn't imagined. And isn't that the spirit we want to see in what our students write?

Of course it's one thing to develop our sensibilities to the point that they really are useful to our students, and another thing to announce to the world that most of your students are getting a B- or a "Sometimes" in poetry writing. Let's face it, grading poetry is a lost cause. On the other hand, if we omit poetry from writing portfolios entirely, we run the danger of appearing to send it back out beyond the margins, to obscure its centrality to writing, to see it only as "enrichment." So should we give poetry a kind of diplomatic immunity, allowing it to enter the writing portfolio without being assessed?

Rather than being daunted by this question and the others raised in this article, we should see them as opportunities for rethinking, discussing, and deepening the ways we read what our students write.

PLUGS & IDEAS

I Will Sing Life: Voices from the Hole in the Wall Gang Camp is a powerful and beautiful book about seven children who attended Paul Newman's Hole in the Wall Gang Camp, a place for children with life-threatening illnesses. For teachers of writing, the special interest is in the amazing writing by these children and the guidance they received from their young counsellors Dahlia Lithwick and Larry Berger, both of whom were inspired by Kenneth Koch's books. However, through interviews and many color photographs, we also get to know these children personally and to witness their extraordinary courage. This book, equally valuable for teachers and students, should be in every school library, at least. *I Will Sing Life* is available in a hardcover edition ($22.95 from Little Brown).

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The Center for Multicultural Children's Literature was founded last year for the sole purpose of increasing multicultural representation in children's literature. The Center is now accepting applications from writers and illustrators who would like to take part in the Center's mentor program. The idea is to pair up accepted applicants with professional authors and illustrators to create new books. For further information and application materials, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to: Center for Multicultural Literature, HarperCollins, 10 East 53rd St., 30th Floor, New York, NY 10022.

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If you've been wanting to learn Italian but can't get to Italy, you might want to try a telecourse called *In Italiano*, which has been airing on some PBS stations. *In Italiano* covers the equivalent of two years of course work, and is available in a set of seven videocassettes (27 lessons), along with textbooks, a workbook, and a teacher's guide. For more information, contact: Coast Telecourses, Coastline Community College, 11460 Warner Ave., Fountain Valley, CA 92708. Tel. (714) 241-6109.

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Recently Teachers &Writers took part in a benefit that was described as the first poetry game show ever. Five teams representing New York City poetry organizations—the Academy of American Poets, Poets House, Poets & Writers, the St. Mark's Poetry Project, and T&W—competed in a riotous evening at the Nuyorican Poets Café to help raise money for the NYC Poetry Calendar. The competition, emceed by the rowdy, funny, and sophisticated performance poet Bob Holman, consisted of these events: 1) *Dead Poets' Slam.* A designated team member reads, recites, or performs one poem (time limit: three minutes). The winner was an inspired performance of a poem by Futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov. Judging was by "impartial" poets throughout the audience, who held up their scores in Olympic style (8.1, 9.3, etc.), except in the second and fourth events. 2) *Poetry Spelling Bee.* Traditional spelling bee format. One team member was asked to spell a poet's name or a technical literary term. The audience gasped as "syzygy" and "Czeslaw Milosz" came rolling off the tongue letter by letter. 3a) *Instant Sudden Death Overtime Haiku.* A team member had to invent a spontaneous haiku immediately after being given its subject. 3b) *Intermission Written Improv.* During a brief intermission, each team wrote a collaborative poem incorporating certain words provided by the emcee. After the intermission, a team member performed the poem. 4) *What's That Line?* As poet and anthologist David Lehman read tidbits from various famous and not-so-famous poems, teams shouted out some pretty weird guesses as to titles and authors. The best part of the evening consisted of great amounts of cheering, good-natured jeering, clanging cowbells, and other noisemakers. Because we all acted like children, it occured to us that children might enjoy taking part in their own poetry game shows. What do you think?