About the Author

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Razelle serves on many campus committees, including Write to Learn, the Library Committee, and, most recently, the Curriculum Development Group in the School of Business. Her interest in not-for-profit organizations has led her to work with the Anti-Violence Partnership of Philadelphia, of which she has been Board Chairperson for six years.
Advantages of Student Portfolios in Business Courses

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Abstract
Portfolios can be used in the Human Resources Management classroom to accomplish a number of evaluative and feedback functions. First, students (and teachers) observe progress in students' acquisition of higher-order thinking skills. Second, portfolios provide a vehicle for students to acquire critical skills, such as giving and receiving feedback, applying concepts, learning writing skills, and developing teamwork. Third, portfolios can be used as guidance and counseling tools to improve student work. And fourth, students gain both a sense of closure and a feeling of accomplishment. For programs seeking accreditation, portfolios could easily serve as continuous improvement measures in management courses.

The Teaching Problem: Portfolios as Part of the Solution

Learning is not a unitary concept. Yes, it does involve the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and information. But it also presents a multifaceted challenge for each of us. Teaching can be an attempt to impart knowledge, create a sense of method, facilitate the development of and support the acquisition of skills. If we are among the fortunate, we may even see the fruits of our students' creations. (Hall, 1994)

Portfolios have been used by artists, photographers, and orth-
odontists (to name a few professions) as a practical way to demonstrate capability to employers, potential clients, and admissions committees. For over five years, I have used portfolios in Human Resources Management and Organizational Behavior as a tool to measure student development and learning. However, over the years I discovered many unintended consequences for me and for the students. Initially I intended to “measure” learning, but in fact the portfolio has functioned to summarize and integrate for the student a body of Human Resources knowledge acquired over a semester. Students see the end result, which they were responsible for creating. This gives them both a sense of closure and a feeling of accomplishment. Second, students (and teachers) observe progress—as with a good investment portfolio—over a period of time in students’ higher-order thinking skills. Third, portfolios provide a vehicle for students to acquire critical skills, such as giving and receiving feedback, applying concepts, learning writing skills, and working in teams. And fourth, portfolios can be used as guidance and counseling tools to improve student work. In addition, for those programs seeking accreditation, portfolios could easily serve as continuous improvement measures in management courses.

Students assume control of their productivity, and they learn to see where and what they need to improve. They also control and manage their time over the semester, as they know from the first day what is required. They amaze themselves and take a vested interest in work and class discussions.1 Both student and teacher have documentation of improvement and development, and hence students appreciate their work. No longer a tabulation of test scores, the portfolio reflects student achievement and a meaningful grade.

A teacher finds herself in a dilemma by encouraging student growth while under pressure to measure learning outcomes. In practice, portfolios are used as a measure of student learning in the sense that students receive a number grade for the components of their portfolio (50% for newspaper memos and cases and 50% for the research report). I tell the students their grade...
is not additive; rather, I am looking for progress over the semester. I know this may differ from my colleagues' methods of grading, but my conscious goal is to encourage and push students to keep trying to improve their answers and their research paper. I want to stimulate their need to achieve by giving them reliable and frequent feedback as well as challenging tasks. Portfolios enable me to integrate course content and skills.

The question then is, on what basis does a teacher give a grade? Although traditionally grading has been a criterion-referenced approach, the grade is in part a valuing statement because writing proficiency, growth, and development are measured as well. The dilemma here is to set up outcomes very clearly, benchmarks of proficiency that have specific observable outcomes, no matter the growth. Indeed, most students improve by the end; however, students must reach certain levels, or they fail the course. (Table 1 below illustrates how tasks and skills combine in the preparation of their research reports.)

Table 1

Critical Events in the Research Process:
Sample Schedule (13-week Course)

Week 1
Needs assessments completed (Skills Required of Manager). Results shared in class. Skills and usefulness explained.

Weeks 2 and 3
Topics selected from list.
  • Teacher monitors list (no duplications).
  • Teacher explains some topics and audience for paper.
  • Teacher links newspaper items to topics.

Week 4
First draft of Feasibility Study prepared (3–4 pages):
  • Problem statement.
• Sources/references.
• Working outline.
Expression of ideas encouraged.
Class broken into triads (self-selection) to read and discuss
draft. Group reports presented on start-up problems and
results of research.
Problem solving: ideas and solutions shared.

Weeks 5 and 6
Revised Feasibility Study submitted, then graded by profes-
sor and returned with detailed suggestions.

Weeks 7 and 8
Performance appraisal developed for oral reports.
Oral reports assessed by class.
Small groups used as a training exercise; standards of perfor-
mance discussed and agreed on; reports scored based on
performance appraisal; suggestions offered to improve re-
ports.

Weeks 9 and 10
Written reports submitted (first complete versions read by
members of triad).
Instructor feedback provided; individual reports revised.

Weeks 11, 12, and 13
Final versions of papers submitted. Papers graded.

The Research and Writing task
Those of us teaching junior-level management courses usu-
ally assign term papers to a whole class of students to be
completed individually as one means of assessing the learning
outcomes of individuals. However, if the same assignment is
made to groups of students, who work cooperatively over the
course of the semester, writing term papers becomes a process
during which students are also involved in practicing various
sophisticated management skills. Verbal communication (in-
including listening); managing time and stress; managing individual decisions; recognizing, defining, and solving problems; motivating and influencing others; delegating; setting goals and articulating a vision; gaining self-awareness; team building; and managing conflict have been identified by Whetten and Cameron (1993) as the top ten skills of effective managers. The authors also mention the need for flexibility in approach to problems as a necessary attribute of successful managers.

Students (and teachers) who view the class process merely as churning out content, unaware of the skills and abilities required to complete the task, miss crucial aspects of the writing task. However, if the same students work in a cooperative, peer-centered environment during the writing process, they can gain a sense of method, develop judgment, and acquire the interpersonal skills I have mentioned above that are necessary in a management environment.

Course portfolios (students' collected work for the semester) contain all written stages of newspaper memos, cases, and the paper, and confirm a steady improvement and focus in their research. Final portfolios include a needs analysis survey (that is, a student self-appraisal of performance on research-related skills), a clearly marked pretest, and a post-test. A personal evaluation of student improvements (skills and knowledge) over the course of the semester follows this. Next come research report materials, which include students' scores on the oral report of their research (given towards the end of the semester), the written research report itself (including outline), and readers' comments on the research report (three versions and three sets of comments). Students mark the comments and tell me how they responded to the peer comments. Next comes a feasibility study (which is an initial testing of the waters prior to doing the research and writing the report). Students should include all versions with the latest one on top. Cases and newspaper articles in reverse chronological order, with Exam Number Three (cases and memos) on top, round out the portfolio.

Students start these tasks at home; then I use small group
discussions in class to review and comment on their work, giving them opportunity to revise their work before I grade it. The newspaper memos and cases are formally graded three times during the semester, after multiple opportunities for discussion and revisions. The research reports, and all the steps associated with them, require readers' comments so that the final portfolios contain comments and the final clean copy.

The newspaper assignment, research paper (oral and written), and casework are dense assignments in that they accomplish many teaching goals: students must (1) know the facts and issues related to their topic and possible solutions; (2) present and write a quality research paper, using problem solving and interpersonal skills; and (3) practice the skills of data search, i.e., library researching, interviewing, integrating, and applying concepts throughout the whole process (Prince & Helms, 1993).

Because classroom activities simulate human resource tasks students might encounter on the job, they accept these assignments as a real-world requirement. Students know the audience (their boss) and the level of expertise required for class work; authenticity is established through content and skills. Library searches, computer literacy, interviews, observations, and analysis are used in a collaborative environment to produce their work. The stress students feel in writing papers is minimized because the task is broken into manageable pieces, and the students develop enough trust and openness to ask for help. Students are engaged in time management, planning, decision making, explaining their work, and making an oral report (all of which are key managerial skills for organizational life/post graduate work, as noted above).

Mentoring opportunities between teacher and student and among students abound. Learning to give feedback, to ask for it in a timely fashion, to know what to ask for may seem like obvious behaviors, but we are not born with them—they need to be learned and practiced. The paper-writing processes provide ample opportunity for interaction—informal group discussions about common problems to peer exchanges of the
progress made on individual reports. By the end of the semester, everyone has had a mentor and has been a mentor to someone (Elbow & Belanoff, 1989; Ramsey & Couch, 1994; Steffens, 1988).

No doubt this is a labor-intensive process for students and for instructors. Some students complain they have never written so much; to them, it is busywork. What they are saying is that the teacher has forced them to work throughout the semester on tasks that are somewhat amorphous—not at all like studying for a multiple-choice test. Developing performance standards and clarifying tasks require class time and patience. Despite this, with the use of collaborative learning techniques, the students own the process and are much less dependent on the instructor by the end of the semester. Even in light of the drawbacks mentioned above, I strongly recommend some type of portfolio for all management classes.

The feasibility study makes writing the term paper more manageable and accessible to a diverse student population. It is especially helpful to English as a Second Language students, who appreciate having a schedule for completion of the various parts of the research task. In addition, because they are included as equal team members, they are able to ask for help from other students without embarrassment (See Parker, 1993, for a discussion of “the inclusive classroom”).

The student triads exchange copies of their feasibility studies. Showing the first version to peers or professors is not the usual routine in college classrooms. The first draft is usually still in students’ heads. The interaction with peers in a simulation environment helps students overcome the feeling of being subordinates in a hierarchical organization. Part of the unfreezing of writer's block occurs through in-class discussion of students' early work (before it is clear what they want to do) with peers in the student triads. Each group reports on questions or problems, or summarizes a first draft for the class. Everyone has an opportunity to discuss difficulties and hear a full range of typical start-up problems encountered by classmates. Questions about details, such as what is meant by the
term “sources,” and what is a working outline, are answered by the professor. To reduce barriers to change, this first draft is not graded; the professor collects it, reads it, and returns it with comments.

For students who had a productive search, the next job is to winnow through sources and clarify global ideas, finding specific concepts that relate to their topics and to put these concepts into an organizational context. For procrastinators, having a schedule compels them either to come to the professor early in the semester or go to the library, since the class is moving ahead quickly to the next deadline, the second version (Elbow & Belanoff, 1989). During this stage, students begin to sift and logically organize their information.

The content begins taking shape with each rewrite of the problem statement; many students realize that their notions are too broad, that they have to be concrete, and they usually recognize that it is time to look at the textbook seriously. A common mistake is to describe a topic, such as “AIDS in the Workplace,” without putting it into a human resource context.

At every stage of the work, students actively listen to each other and are open to help and suggestions since they now genuinely understand what they need to know.

Performance Appraisal: Part of the Grading Process

After the feasibility studies are completed (Weeks 7 and 8), the class develops its own performance appraisal to evaluate the oral reports. Students are asked to generate “performance standards” in small groups (usually in thirty minutes over three sessions). Designing performance appraisal criteria also encourages students to use materials from other courses, such as Public Speaking, Composition, and Principles of Management. They build on prior knowledge and apply it in an HRM context. As the discussion evolves, students talk about the importance of content over presentation. Once that issue is settled, other performance dimensions are evaluated. The performance appraisal establishes variables in the students’ own words:
• Does the presenter have a clear problem statement?
• Does the presenter clearly relate the topic to HRM?
• Is the presentation organized?
• Is the opening a grabber?
• Have all the legal issues been explained?
• Is there an international component?
• Do conclusions/recommendations follow from the body?
• Are credible sources used?
• Are there concrete examples?

The group work models the ideal performance appraisal process: workers set the standards and in the process are trained to apply these standards. Everyone knows as clearly as possible what is expected without actually doing it; everyone is involved, including the professor.

By the time the performance appraisal is finished, it is reasonably clear to every student that an A report far exceeds requirements. The group discussions help the procrastinators/weaker students to focus on their deficits and revise. Students appreciate having a clear structure with deadlines at each step and opportunity for feedback throughout:

I feel that the feasibility study process pushes [students] to meet certain deadlines for their paper writing process. I was an extremely busy student this semester, and having to have certain things done at a certain date gave me structure and guidance on where I should be with my report.—T.K.

Frequently at this point, students resubmit their feasibility studies. Those without enough credible sources manage to put in more library time or complete their interviews. Working outlines develop more concrete points. Ownership of the research is firmly in student hands:

Now, when my paper is done and I did the oral presentation of my research, I want to admit that I am glad that we had the assignment to do the feasibility study. It helped me to
understand the standards for this course. I have made a lot of progress since my first problem statement. I am confident about my paper and I know much more about the topic.—F.D.

The performance appraisal is pretested by using it with the first oral report. Someone usually volunteers to be the first speaker. We debrief and fine-tune the instrument before the next presentation. This process of clarifying performance standards teaches students to assess peer work in a fair and equitable manner by giving and getting suggestions; it also prepares them for work in organizations that rely on self-governing work teams, an increasing part of today's corporate landscape.

First Drafts
The first version (three copies) of the entire paper (Week 10) is distributed for peer review. The performance appraisal is used as a checklist for peer readers to provide meaningful comments and suggestions. The students are acting as consultants and understand what needs to be changed. Of course, students can verify or clarify feedback with the professor, but by the end of the semester, there is a palpable confidence in students' own judgments and a willingness to listen to peers, as the following quote illustrates:

[The feasibility study] is a kind of [system] of checks and balances, which allows for feedback from the professor and other students. This constant feedback to the student is essential. I enjoy knowing where the professor feels that I stand in reference to my progress, and I also enjoy hearing from other students their views and suggestions. [It tells me] where to strengthen my paper to be readable by all.—T.K.

As collaborative learning develops, students assume some responsibility for the course material and, in the process, help themselves and one another learn. The collaborative learning
approach shifts some responsibility from the teacher to the students; they become “active participants in their own education” (Steffens, 1988, p. 1; Hall, 1994).

No question, by Week 13, the reports are an improvement over the first drafts of the original assignment. Since the research paper is 50% of the course grade, students are motivated to work; at the same time, they know they have had a fair and achievable goal. They are pleased to become class experts.

Results of Peer-Guided Tasks

By using modified total quality management techniques, the undergraduate has continuous feedback from professor and peers. Generally, oral reports are honestly evaluated and provide students impetus to revise. Students have heard their work, incorporated feedback from the audience, and have ample time to polish the final paper. This structured process is broken into manageable pieces, which can be modified at every step. Deadlines for written work are reasonable; tasks are understood. Above all, the organization of learning gives people necessary support and provides enough pressure so that the work gets done.

My experience has been that the quality of all the work consistently improves over the semester, and students feel that their work is the best that they have done. In large part, students are challenged by higher standards requiring them to use multiple kinds of data: journals, government documents, professional articles, interviews, and text materials. As the term progresses, students’ internal motivation is stimulated in several dimensions—having complex tasks, making the learning process meaningful, taking personal responsibility to contribute to class and course learning. Students experience the satisfaction of seeing the result, and they receive validation from their peers, who recognize them as subject experts. Students feel that the work challenges them and is useful in their jobs and other college courses.

For better students, the process provides an opportunity to
help others, e.g., by suggesting sources for materials or by sharing materials they have found. They have opportunity to train, teach, and explain. Even the weakest students contribute to each piece of the process (from suggesting sources, to listening to others' ideas, etc.). All students understand professional staff interdependence in an organizational setting.

The class goal of completing individual term papers fosters quality work and encourages cooperation since the writing of term papers adds to everyone's knowledge. It becomes the norm for students to provide help to each other; they do not have to ask for it. By shifting the collaboration to a student-peer partnership, dependency on the professor is reduced. Some students will also check with the professor privately for reassurance, but this changes as the group develops more independence. Of course there is the potential danger that people will overlook weaknesses in some reports and pass them on as satisfactory. This does not happen. Instead, weaker students are less frustrated and improve their work by reading and listening to other reports. All students benefit from reading a variety of sources, applying ideas from other courses, and trying a creative process. As we work through the process, I encourage students to reframe ideas and take new directions in their work, but also try to get them to be realistic about what they can accomplish in one semester.

Other teachers may be reluctant to make use of a collaborative approach to coursework because they fear that students might indulge in grade inflation. My experience has been that students are generally fair or tend towards severity in grading their peers. One valid concern is the possible lack of capable students in some of the triads. To make the peer collaboration process work more effectively, there needs to be a "critical mass" of students—usually one to a triad—already possessing some of the interpersonal management skills noted above. I try to offset a lack of skills in some of the triads either by rearranging them or by providing feedback and, if necessary, by personal consultations.

This process, developed in my Human Resources Manage-
ment course, can be adapted for other management courses. The critical elements are specific tasks and a calendar with ample feedback loops, along with a supportive organizational climate. I have also used this research process for short Organizational Behavior papers. The same outcomes result. Papers are professional, and students experience less stress and have less resistance to rewriting. In fact, the students actually like the process. Instead of running experiential exercises removed from student experiences, I use the coursework, making certain that students perceive the tasks as something they will use on the job.

The skills a professional needs post-academia—team-building, reliance, collaboration, and shared decision-making—are all fostered by the group research process. This classroom-based exercise is really a powerful learning tool.

Notes

1 See Hall, “Management Education by Design,” for a theoretical model of student dependency.
2 See Frankl, “A Timetable Process to Improve Research Papers in a Peer-Centered Learning Environment,” *Journal of Management Education* (1995). The feasibility study consists of three sections: a problem statement, a list of sources or references, and an outline used as preparatory work for writing a research paper. By articulating the tasks involved, students judge the feasibility of the project (hence the name “feasibility study”). The feasibility study enables me to give timely feedback and meaningful oversight during the early stages of the writing task. It also helps students become better thinkers and writers and increases the likelihood of quality papers.

References


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managing, valuing diversity. Unpublished manuscript. Seattle U., Albers School of Business and Economics.

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*Henry Ford II, keynote speaker at the original Management Institute Conference in 1973, with then-College President Mark Chamberlain (right).*
John C. Marous, retired CEO, Westinghouse Electric, spoke at the Management Institute's 1994 Scholarship Dinner. He is shown here with Heather Urbanski, a Rowan College Scholarship recipient.