Tracing the Evolution of Portfolios :
A Case Study

Laurie Brady

Introduction

From the early to mid-1990s, two trends have shaped the practice of assessment and reporting in Australian schools. The first is the emphasis on outcomes, or overt, demonstrable benchmarks of student achievement, as a means of demonstrating individual and system accountability. The second is the authentic assessment movement, previously dubbed 'alternative assessment,' arguably a reaction to the testing tradition in assessment, and with an emphasis on performance assessment and situated assessment (tasks assessed as students work in natural classroom contexts).

Both trends found perfect expression in the portfolio as a tool for both assessment and reporting. The portfolio, essentially a strategic collection of student work, demonstrates student outcomes, particularly if an outcomes statement is attached to the relevant work to denote the syllabus outcome being achieved. It is also an ongoing expression of student performance that may operate as a meaningful individual learning narrative.

In New South Wales (NSW) portfolios have been officially endorsed from the mid-1990s. In 1996, *Principles for Assessing and Reporting in NSW Government Schools* (NSW Department of School Education) provided a meagre two paragraphs on portfolios, characterising them as 'an eclectic mix of student work samples' and suggesting that they can be long-term or short-term (a unit of work only). The 1997 *Strategies for Assessing and Reporting in Primary Schools* (NSW Department of School Education) provided detailed examples of portfolios and information on their planning. While other NSW Department of Education and Training support material on portfolios has targeted teachers (NSW Department

of Education and Training, 1999), by 2000 many schools were in their first or second year of portfolio implementation.

This article reports a case study of portfolio implementation in one NSW primary school in its third year of portfolio development. As a case study was conducted one year earlier (2000) in the same school, the purpose of the reported study was to trace the evolution of portfolios. On the basis of a survey of 64 schools conducted just prior to the first case study, it was suggested (Brady, 2001) that the case study school was prototypal.

While a case study may yield rich findings beyond the intended framework of investigation, there were several questions of particular concern:

- Have there been changes in teacher perceptions of the purpose of portfolios?

- How are these perceptions of purpose evidenced in desired or actual portfolio contents?

- Have there been changes in teacher perceptions of the desired and actual degree of student engagement (student self-assessment and negotiation with teachers)?

- Have teacher perceptions of portfolio purpose changed in terms of the influence of outcomes and accountability?

- How central are portfolios for teachers both in the assessment and planning process?

Literature

There are many interpretations of the purpose of portfolios in the literature, and these purposes are reflected in the advocacy of different portfolio types. Wolf's (1991, p.36) early definition of portfolios as 'a depository of artefacts or assortment of documents that may include pencil

and paper tests, classroom observations, tapes, artwork, poems or stories' and that require 'a written reflection by the developer on the significance or contributions of these artefacts', echoes the more recent American definitions that include ongoing student reflection as essential. Such a requirement is not present in the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) definition: 'A deliberate, strategic and specific collection of student work or evidence of student work...that demonstrates that learning has occurred'. Nor is it present in Padgham's (2001) Australian definition, though reflective journals and peer- and self-assessment are suggested as contents. Other definitions reflect the subject specific nature of portfolios. For instance, Brown's (2000, p.119) definition of a mathematics portfolio is 'a collection of student's work, often featuring problem solving projects, selected by the student or prescribed by the teacher'.

The notion of definition reflecting type is illustrated by the different classifications of portfolios. Benoit and Yang (1996) identify the accountability portfolio and the instructional portfolio. The former might be appropriate to demonstrate student achievement in tests; the latter might be more suitable to demonstrate a more holistic understanding of student achievement. Richter (1997) identifies the working portfolio containing daily work, and the showcase portfolio containing best work. Valencia and Place(1994) identify four types:

- the showcase portfolio which includes the student's best work;
- the evaluation portfolio which includes specified and marked work;
- the documentation portfolio which contains student work systematically kept by the teacher but not marked;
- the process portfolio which contains ongoing work and student self-reflection.

The work of Hall and Hewitt-Gervais (2000, pp.227–228) further illustrates that the use of portfolios relates to a variety of factors. Their survey of 314 Kindergarten to Year 5 teachers found that teachers 'make deliberate decisions regarding the instructional, learning and assessment uses of their student's portfolios' and that 'these decisions appear to be heavily impacted by the maturity or skill level of the child, the purposes of the application, and the classroom environment within which the application occurs'.

Such decisions have implications for the content of portfolios. While the list of possible inclusions is exhaustive (prose, poetry, summaries, journals, artwork, models, cassettes, videotapes, book reports, word processing, computer software programs, self-evaluations from checklists and rating scales), the teacher, in making decisions, must answer several questions. Should portfolios include material from all learning areas or 'basic skills' areas? Should rough drafts or only polished work be included? Should portfolios include accounts of out-of-school experiences? Should all inclusions relate to the demonstration of outcomes? To what extent should student self-reflection be incorporated?

This last question about self-reflection is answered unequivocally in the American literature. Student self-reflection is perceived as essential (Bailey & Gusky, 2001; Ellison, 2001; Smith, 2000), and so is teacher and student collaboration. Typically, Chen and Martin (2000) claim that teachers and students should select work, reflect upon it and share it with parents and peers: 'taken together this team approach to children's assessment, as opposed to more traditional forms of assessment, is one which presents a more authentic assessment of a child's performance'. Vizyak (1995), assessing two portfolios—a student-managed and a teacher-student portfolio—allows students to select a favourite piece from the teacher-student portfolio bimonthly, and affixes a statement providing reasons for the choice. While there are accounts of portfolio implementation, there are very few reported Australian cases; that of Padgham (2001) is one.

There are also very few blueprints for tracing the evolution of portfolios. Paulson and Paulson's (1994) Oregon study produced four stages of portfolio growth: an off-track portfolio, an emerging portfolio, an on-track portfolio and an outstanding portfolio. It is problematic though as to whether such a rubric for evaluating portfolios applies in NSW where the portfolio may well serve a different systemic purpose. For instance, a key factor in the Paulson and Paulson (1994) rubric is the increasing degree of student reflection and engagement. Such a factor may arguably not be as defining if the purpose is accountability.

The reported case study traces the evolution of portfolios in one prototypal primary school in NSW, focusing on teacher perception of portfolio purpose; teacher perception of the desired and real contents of portfolios; teacher perception of the desired and real amount of student 'engagement' in terms of self-assessment and negotiation with teachers; teacher perception of the significance of outcomes in informing portfolio use; and the impact of portfolios on assessment in particular and planning in general.

Context

The case school, while situated on Sydney's upper north shore, is socioeconomically diverse. There are 515 students in 18 regular classes, and 52 languages are represented. Single houses, unit dwelling and community housing support a range of ethnic communities. The staff comprise a range of ages and teaching experience. At the time of the first study in 2000, the school was in its second year of portfolio implementation.

Titled 'student progress folders', portfolios at the case school are spiral bound in hard plastic covers, and the work is enclosed in plastic envelopes. They are introduced as an essential part of assessment and reporting procedures, to assist communication between parents and the school.

Each work sample is accompanied by an outcomes sheet, and boxes relating to the more precise indicators have to be ticked according to whether the student is 'working towards', 'achieving' or 'achieving above'. For example, for the early Stage 3 outcome for space, 'recognises, visualises, describes, makes and represents three-dimensional objects', the indicators are 'models 3D solids from isometric drawings and photographs', and 'shows simple perspective in drawing'.

For Terms 1 and 3, there are five work samples included in the portfolio. These are determined at the beginning of the term by teachers in the respective stages and relate to reading, writing, number, measurement and space. These entries are the basis of a parent–teacher interview. For Terms 2 and 4, corresponding with half-yearly and yearly reports, work samples are provided for each learning area, though the principal encourages integrated samples, for example, writing and reading in maths, or art that shows language. The progress folder is sent home after each term, though in terms 2 and 4 it includes the child's report.

Method

Burns (1997) claims that 'case study' is a portmanteau term, but typically involves study of an individual unit. In the study reported, the unit or 'bounded system'(Burns, 1997; Stake, 1994) is the school. Burns (1997, p.364) further claims that the bounded system should either be 'very representative or extremely atypical'. As previously indicated, the chosen school is considered very typical. Its selection is an instance of purposive sampling. As Burns (1997, p.370) indicates, 'a blueprint of attributes is constructed, and the researcher locates a unit that matches the blueprint recipe'.

The case study method was chosen as particularly appropriate, for as Yin (1993, p.31) indicates, 'the contextual variables are so numerous and rich that no experimental design can be applied'. The study had a number of purposes. First, it was to illuminate variables and phenomena for more intensive investigation; second, it was to explore various phenomena both to provide insights and to establish generalisations about the wider school (system) population; and third, it was considered valuable as a case in its own right.

Data were collected from surveys, interviews and document analysis. The purpose of the survey was to obtain data that might be used as a basis for interviews, and for triangulation in the data analysis. The interviews observed a form typically associated with case studies, that is, they were relatively unstructured to enable teachers to be informants more than respondents.

Ten teachers and the principal were interviewed, each for approximately 45 minutes. The teachers represented all school grades, as did the selection of portfolios examined.

Data from the three sources were clustered in themes, in such a way that the themes emerge from the data rather than being imposed upon it (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The final reduced data were displayed on matrices with text in cells, so results are reported by observing clusters/patterns. Following is a reporting of these results.

Findings

Portfolios are perceived as accountability tools

While there was a mix of responses, the predominant theme relating to portfolio purpose reflected that espoused in the school portfolio's introduction, that is, accountability to parents. Typical comments included 'a great way for parents to see what students are doing', to show the parents what is behind things in the report' and 'to communicate with parents'. There were though a variety of responses indicating purpose for the students and teachers:

> To help children see how they're going...to show them their improve-ment...some children think they haven't learned.

> To show what students are able to do, what they're achieving...and having some way of tracking their progress.

The survey, which presented a number of items on purpose, confirmed the staff's concurrence with the DET definition of portfolio purpose, that is, a strategic collection of student

work that demonstrates learning over time, and that indicates that syllabus outcomes have been achieved. However, the lack of reference to outcomes in defining the purpose of portfolios was notable.

A few staff were concerned about the limitations of the school portfolio. One teacher, claiming that portfolios were very helpful when talking to parents at interview, described their purpose as 'giving examples of some of the things that children do in class'. She argued that as portfolios indicated a different outcome each term 'they don't show an ongoing assessment of one particular thing...they don't show a progression of learning'. Another teacher, supporting more portfolio inclusions, but with reduced documentation, and arguing for greater 'individual spontaneity' and classroom decision-making rather than uniform policy, characterised the school's portfolio practice as 'very stifled, very contained, very limited in scope, very restrictive, very lacking in student initiative, very minimalist'.

Despite the criticism, there was both general acceptance of the need for a uniform school policy on portfolios, and endorsement of the principal's structured approach of introducing portfolios to help establish for staff and parents 'what outcomes look like'.

In terms of portfolio evolution, it was notable that staff referred less to the primacy of outcomes in defining purpose. In 2000, the link between the outcomes-based assessment regime and portfolios was often made explicit, and reference was often made to the outcomes-based education mindset. As means for the survey items relating the different purposes of portfolios (including that indicating adherence to outcomes) were not markedly different between the two studies, outcomes apparently remain important. The fact that they are referred to less, may be explained by the fact that assessment within an outcomes framework is now assumed, just as planning by outcomes has become routine. However, it was obvious that staff are increasingly questioning the purpose of the portfolio simply as a means of indicating student achievement of outcomes and indicators. Teachers are perceiving the portfolio as having a versatility beyond the practice of matching work samples to indicators.

Portfolios are perceived as comprising a variety of artefacts from all learning areas

While work samples in English and maths were seen as essential portfolio contents, there was also considerable support for the other learning areas to

be included. There was moderate support for the inclusion of accounts of out-of-school experiences, completed assignments, merit certificates, and student journal entries. Teachers supported the inclusion of the school report in Terms 2 and 4 as 'it gives more sustenance.'

Issues relating to portfolio contents are intertwined with perceived purpose. One problem relating to both involved progression and integration. The issue of progression relates to a perception of discontinuity in portfolios, or school practice in relation to them. The following statements indicate a general concern with reporting student achievement through the nomination of select and discrete outcomes for each term:

> Often we're looking at a particular outcome or indicator and that is what is mentioned in the report to the parent in order to show we believe in the accountability thing as well as the communication thing, to show them what their child understands, but it depends on the time in the term the work sample is done.

> I feel frustrated that all I'm doing is assessing that shows they can or can't do a particular thing, and putting it in there to prove to the parents...we're not actually talking about learning.

A few teachers supported integration in portfolio contents. The following is typical:

> I really support putting things in that show integrated learning...writing and reading that show maths...art that shows language. I'd really support that.

Perception of portfolio contents has evolved dramatically. Since 2000, there has been a marked increase in support for inclusion of learning areas other than English and maths, and substantial increase in support for other artefacts including completed assignments, contracts, merit certificates, accounts of out-of-school experiences and student journal entries. The only artefact item in the survey to be rated lower in the current study is 'test papers', which arguably reflects a growing belief that the portfolio is less an accountability tool only, and more a means of expressing holistic student achievement.

Another element in the evolution of portfolio contents is the developing support for integrating learning area inclusions. This practice has been promoted by the principal.

Portfolios are seen as involving student engagement

There was support for student engagement both in terms of self-assessment and students negotiating with teachers about portfolio contents.

A large majority of teachers supported collaboration in determining portfolio contents, and one teacher included it as part of her defined portfolio purpose. Two teachers didn't support student involvement in determining English and maths inclusions. The following is typical:

> Teachers ought to have time to sit down with the children and say 'we have been looking at...how do you think you've gone', and then be able to say 'if you want to show mum and dad your work, what would you like to put in the folder.

Self-assessment in portfolios was also strongly supported at all stages. Even a kindergarten teacher claimed:

> We do self-assessment...Kindergarten draw a face on their work to show that it's good, or that they can do a little better.

One teacher, discussing self-assessment as an inclusion, described the portfolio as 'a CV for kids'. Another teacher cautioned about the need for training in self-assessment. The burgeoning interest is reflected by the recent optional inclusion of self-assessment in the school portfolio. Stage 3 portfolios, for example, contained a 'personal reflection sheet' requiring answers to six unfinished sentences relating to student perceptions of their work.

This increase in support for student involvement and self-assessment is the most dramatic aspect of the evolution in perceptions about portfolios. Such notions were rarely present in the 2000 interviews. Portfolios were then perceived as tightly controlled and teacher-directed tools for demonstrating the achievement of outcomes. Thus there was little support for student engagement. The recent surveys reveal a marked increase in all items relating to support for student involvement, with the most dramatic increases relating to self-assessment.

While definitions of portfolios are influenced by their purpose, and while school systems articulate their function, it is an increase in this dimension of student engagement that Paulson and Paulson (1994) identify as a key factor in their stages of portfolio growth.

Portfolios are seen as important yet not central to assessment

All teachers acknowledged that portfolios were important, though most viewed them as one necessary part of assessment and reporting practice. While approximately half the teachers made no distinction between assessment and reporting, the other half were inclined to view portfolios as more a means of reporting than an assessment tool.

Portfolios were regarded as one aspect only of assessment which included a great variety of other strategies, notably the performance assessment strategies involving observation. Two other reasons were given for not affording portfolios 'centrality'. One was the current perceived limitation of portfolios in not 'showing an ongoing assessment of one particular thing', and therefore not showing a progression of learning. The other was the belief that there is much student work that is not readily assessable in portfolios. Oral and drama work were given as examples.

All teachers viewed the portfolio as a valuable reporting tool, for as one teacher put it succinctly, 'parents want the paper thing'. Again, the teachers nominated a range of other reporting strategies, particularly the provision of comments on student work.

While there may not have been notable changes in the assessment and reporting practices of teachers over the last year, there was evidence of a change in perception. Survey items relating to the extent of use of portfolios in assessment and reporting reveal a marked decrease in means. This suggests either a perception that portfolios are one part of a multifaceted assessment process, or a willingness to view the portfolio as having a broader purpose beyond the more formal dictates of demonstrating outcomes. The evidence suggests that portfolios were not seen as less important. They were simply viewed more realistically.

Portfolios are perceived as having an impact on teacher planning

While portfolios were perceived as having made an impact on planning through necessitating a more explicit focus on outcomes, they were not perceived as having changed teaching methods. The following typifies comments on increased focus in planning:

> My planning is much more focused...and that's a positive thing...you're focusing

on those particular outcomes rather than doing a lot of diversifying...I go off on tangents all the time.

One criticism of outcomes-based education in general, which was argued in the objectives debates of the 1960s and 1970s, involves belief that too much structure, or too much allegiance to teaching specific outcomes, will constrain the creative space for teaching. The view that reporting by portfolios involves teaching towards outcomes, and that this limits creativity, was advanced by a number of teachers. 'It's taken my creativity away' and 'It's a little restrictive' were typical.

One teacher, advancing the notion of 'a fine line', captures the general concern: 'There needs to be a fine line between working towards outcomes that you set out to achieve, and to allow for different types of learning to take place'.

There was a general lament about the additional work involved in planning by outcomes that can be demonstrated in portfolios, with one notable exception: 'It cuts down on work, because there it is in front of you, and we sit down as a team and work out the indicators we'll be working on the next term, and that basically is your program, and I just flesh that out'.

There is no marked change in the evolution of portfolios on this dimension, except perhaps in relation to the diminished emphasis on planning by outcomes. As previously indicated, such planning may now be routine.

Portfolios are perceived as having little influence on student learning

Portfolios would have a more demonstrable impact if they were central to student learning, that is, if they were an ongoing learning narrative involving teacher-student collaboration, reflection by both, and self-assessment. While there is support for these elements at the case school, they have not yet been implemented to any degree. The teachers did refer to the pride assumed by students when they were told a piece of work would become part of the portfolio. And the one teacher who did concede the influence of portfolios on learning, expressed it as student direction: 'These kids are now looking at exactly what you are looking at...they're learning a lot more about exactly what you're looking for'.

Portfolios are perceived ideally as developmental, celebratory, negotiated and reflective

Teachers' composite ideal of the portfolio is one involving a greater variety of artefacts (photos,

tapes, high-tech material) in all learning areas; a high degree of self-assessment and student collaboration with teachers; and one which can reflect student development. For most teachers, it should be 'a real celebration of what students can do'.

Again, the idealised notion of the portfolio as negotiated and reflective represents a considerable evolution from the perception in 2000 of the portfolio as a highly teacher-directed accountability tool to demonstrate the achievement of outcomes. The litany of ideal elements are those endorsed as benefits in the literature on portfolios, that is, enabling students to self-assess ; increasing students' self-knowledge; providing opportunities for teacher–student collaboration ; cultivating the notion of individual differences in learning; and enhancing student ownership.

Discussion and Conclusion

Rubrics like that of Paulson and Paulson (1994) are confusing, because notions of what is 'off-track', 'emerging', 'on-track' and 'outstanding' are difficult to relate to all portfolio types. The portfolio implicitly advocated by Paulson and Paulson (1994) is a process portfolio which contains ongoing work and student self-reflection. The rubric has little application to showcase portfolios which are essentially 'brag books,' or evaluation portfolios which include specified and marked work.

The adoption of staged outcomes in NSW has resulted in a portfolio that was initially strongly based on the need for accountability. It has been endorsed across the system as an assessment and reporting tool that is ideally suited to demonstrating the achievement of outcomes. The DET definition, 'a deliberate, strategic and specific collection of student work, or evidence of student work...that demonstrates that learning has occurred', is quite different to the Wolf (1991) definition that is echoed in the more recent American definitions of process portfolios.

However, while it may not be appropriate to transpose a rubric from one country or system to another, there is evidence in the previously prototypal case study school to suggest that portfolios, while retaining an emphasis on accountability, are adopting elements of the 'process portfolio' in relation to increased student choice, self-assessment and ownership.

It is sometimes the nature of innovation, and particularly mandated change, to be initially all-consuming for participants. In the case study school, the once dominant focus on outcomes in

implementing portfolios is gradually becoming a part of routine practice, and the portfolio is being realistically viewed as a valuable tool which can be supplemented by other assessment and reporting strategies. The relaxation of the initial structure expressed in a uniform school policy is now leading staff to consider further changes, notably those involving the inclusion of all learning areas and a variety of other artefacts. After this early phase in which teachers were required to become adept at knowing 'what an outcome looks like', the principal is now seeking less prescription and more teacher decision-making. She views the increased challenging by teachers not as subversion but as a welcome expression of teacher professionalism.

The most aspect of significant evolution though, has been the advocacy of both teacher–student collaboration in determining the contents of portfolios, and student self-assessment. In 2000, support for both was negligible. In 2001, that support was considerable. One teacher captures the prevailing feeling: 'I would like to give the child more input...because I think children know what is involved in learning, so that's what they'd like to talk about and show...and I'd like to see more reflection.

Of course, student negotiation and self-assessment might be accomplished in assessment tasks beyond the portfolio. Self-assessments including checklists, rating scales, reflection logs, discussions, conferences and physical continuums are frequently used. However, relating relevant self-assessments to work samples that demonstrate achievement of outcomes over a period of time provides both a valuable learning narrative for the student, and a helpful tool for reporting to parents and other teachers.

As yet, the teachers believe that portfolios are having little influence on student learning. Arguably the proof of student ownership will be a belief that it can.

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Contents

ARTICLES

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Futures for Australian Curriculum

BOOK REVIEWS

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Contributions may take the form of:

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- Papers of a more practical or applied nature and which are case studies about classroom research, curriculum development and evaluation.

- Brief reports about on-going research and development activities and examples of on-going classroom practices.

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- Typescripts should be sent to the Editor on A4 paper, typed in double spacing on one side only, with margins of at least 2.5cm on all four sides. Papers for the Articles section should usually be no longer than 8,000 words. Instances papers should be 1,000–3,000 words in length.

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