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**Developing a Community of Writers**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Education  
Moravian College  
Bethlehem, Pennsylvania  
2010

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“It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is  
the journey that matters, in the end.”  
~ Ursula K. LeGuin

## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study investigated the experiences of creating writing portfolios in a ninth grade academic-level classroom. Twenty students in ninth grade participated in this study conducted in a suburban junior high school containing approximately 870 students in the northeastern United States. Methods of gathering data included teacher observation, student surveys, informal and formal conferences with students, and student work. Methods of analysis included analytic memos, reflective memos, narrative forms, coding, construction of theme statements, and review of student work. The students experienced a writing workshop setting, where they brainstormed, revised, and edited different forms of writing by applying writing strategies learned through mini lessons and one-on-one conferences. Additionally, students regularly reflected on their work and the work of others, compiled their self-selected work in a writing portfolio, and reflected on their overall learning through their writing experiences. Findings suggest that using writing portfolios in the classroom build students' motivation and confidence, foster creativity, allow students to take ownership of their learning, and generate a strong classroom community. Furthermore, teachers who utilize writing portfolios in the classroom may gain insight into students' thinking, which allow educators the opportunity to model and scaffold students' learning effectively.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the support of others, one cannot succeed. I learned this very quickly as I embarked on this journey, which now leads me to the many thanks I have for those who were my rock during this experience.

First, thank you to my building administrators and fellow colleagues. I am truly blessed to work with such a talented and supportive group of individuals. Thank you for constantly reminding me of the true reason I became an educator—to inspire students.

Without my students, this study would not have been possible. Thank you, period eight, for taking a chance with me to embark on something that turned out to be quite remarkable. Each one of you is capable of so many great things in the years to come. Never stop learning, exploring, and most of all, reflecting on all that you do.

I am eternally grateful for all the new friendships I gained through this experience at Moravian. Thank you to all of my peers for your support, guidance, and the necessary laughter I needed to remain stress-free. Your confidence in me and consistent, positive feedback demonstrate the kindness each of you possesses. Here is to all of your future successes!

Moravian is truly blessed with talented, professional, and passionate graduate professors. I am genuinely grateful for my opportunity to learn from Dr. Joseph Shosh, Dr. Richard Grove, Dr. Charlotte Zales, and Mr. Michael Roth. A

special thanks to Dr. Shosh for serving as my committee chair and for all the time you took to provide meaningful feedback and guidance to me as I created this document. Mr. Roth, thank you for inspiring me to critically think about the ways I can motivate my students to learn and succeed. I appreciate you serving on my thesis committee.

I also wish to thank Mrs. Jennifer Burd for graciously serving on my thesis committee. Thank you for taking time out of your busy life for another fellow educator seeking to validate the importance of providing students' meaningful feedback designed with their needs in mind during the writing process.

My parents instilled in me at a very early age the value of family. Words cannot express the gratitude I have for the support and guidance my family provided me through this learning journey. Mom and Dad, thank you for encouraging me to take chances, to work hard, and to always try my best. I love you both.

Most importantly, I would like to thank Mark, my husband and best friend. Without you, I would not have been able to sit for constant hours on the weekends in front of my computer without interruption. Thank you for keeping our home and personal lives going, maintaining constant patience, and the overwhelming love and support you provided, as I took time to meet one of my own personal goals. I look forward to achieving many more with you by my side.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
COPYRIGHT PAGE.....	ii
URSULA K. LEGUIN QUOTE.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	xiii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	xiv
RESEARCHER STANCE.....	1
From Student, To Teacher, Now Researcher.....	1
My Research Story.....	3
Need for the Study.....	6
Research Question.....	9
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	11
Introduction.....	11
Portfolios.....	13
Authentic Assessment.....	15
Intersection of Assessment and Instruction.....	18
Assessment Over Time.....	19
Writing Portfolios.....	20
Student Choice.....	23

Ownership of Learning.....	26
Motivation.....	28
Self-Reflection.....	31
Classroom Environment.....	35
Constructivist Approach.....	36
Collaboration.....	38
Student and Teacher Conferences.....	41
Summary.....	44
METHODOLOGY.....	46
Research Goals.....	46
Setting.....	47
Participants.....	49
Data Gathering Methods.....	50
Field Notes.....	50
Conference Notes.....	51
Student Work.....	52
Student Reflections.....	53
Student Surveys.....	53
Researcher Log.....	54
The Writing Portfolio.....	54
Trustworthiness Statement.....	54

Acknowledgement of Researcher Biases.....	55
Ethical Guidelines.....	60
Methodology: Timeframe of Study.....	61
THIS YEAR’S STORY.....	64
First Day Jitters.....	64
Grammar, Punctuation, and Spelling: The Essentials of Writing, Right?.....	68
Building a Period Eight Community.....	71
Baseline Writing Assessment.....	78
Creating Individual Goals: I Have a Choice?.....	83
Conferences Round One: You Really Want to Talk to Me?.....	85
Why Do We Write? .....	91
Express and Reflect: All About Ideas.....	95
Developing a Writing Workshop.....	100
Playing Teacher.....	101
Leading the Way.....	109
An Equation for Descriptive Writing.....	111
Peer Reflections.....	113
Conferences Round Two: Let the Students Do the Talking.....	116
Finally, I Can Hand This Thing In!.....	119
Reflection: “You’ve Run Out of Things for Us To Do”.....	120

Mid-Study Survey: Where Are We Now?.....	124
Inform and Explain: Let’s Research.....	126
What is My Name?.....	129
Main Idea Haikus.....	132
Imagery: Not Just for the Narrative.....	134
Conferences Round Three: In a Habit.....	136
Resume: I Need to Plan for the Future?.....	140
Career Cruising.....	141
Changing the Conference Format.....	149
Pulling It All Together: The Portfolio.....	151
The Introductory Reflective Letter.....	155
Conferences: A Bittersweet End in Sight.....	157
Not an End, Just a Stepping Stone.....	161
METHODS OF ANALYSIS.....	168
Codes, Bins, and Themes.....	171
FINDINGS.....	176
Criteria for a Writing Portfolio Environment.....	176
Characteristics of Classroom Environment that Impact Portfolio Success.....	181
Effective Writing Portfolio Strategies: Student-Directed.....	186
Characteristics of a Collaborative Setting.....	192

Students' Understandings Generated.....	193
Effective Writing Portfolio Strategies: Teacher-Directed.....	196
Students' Perceptions.....	200
Results of Teaching Strategies.....	202
Impact of Writing Portfolio Environment on Students' Success.....	204
THE NEXT ACT.....	207
REFERENCES.....	210
RESOURCES.....	217
APPENDIXES.....	218
A – Principal Consent Form.....	218
B – Participant Consent Form.....	220
C – Field Log Entry Sheet.....	222
D – Conference Log Entry Sheet.....	223
E – Individual Reflection Sheet.....	224
F – Student Reflection PMI Sheet.....	225
G – Writing Portfolios: Pre-Study Survey.....	226
H – Writing Portfolios: Mid-Study Survey.....	228
I – Writing Portfolios: Post-Study Survey.....	230
J – Multiple Intelligences Survey.....	232
K – Writing Portfolio Process Handout.....	235
L – Characterization of Me: Writing Portfolio Collage.....	237

M – Baseline Writing Assessment Assignment Sheet.....	238
N – Rubric for Baseline Writing Assessment (Summer Reading).....	240
O – Brainstorming Sheet for Summer Reading Essay.....	241
P – Goal Sheet.....	242
Q – Why Do We Write? Handout.....	243
R – Express and Reflect Rubric.....	244
S – Six Traits Handout.....	245
T – Peer Conference Reflection Sheet.....	248
U – Inform and Explain Rubric.....	249
V – Informative Checklist and Reflection Questions.....	250
W – Final Portfolio Assignment Sheet.....	251
X – Introductory Reflective Letter Outline.....	253
Y – Final Portfolio Rubric.....	255

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Students' Goals for the Writing Portfolio.....	84
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## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. “Building blocks” pastiche of pre-study survey results.....	70
Figure 2. Mrs. Binkley’s writing territories used as teacher modeling.....	73
Figure 3. A snapshot of students’ conversations during the Freytag’s Pyramid activity in a collaborative setting.....	77
Figure 4. Ross’s baseline writing assessment reflection.....	82
Figure 5. Isaac’s student and teacher conference notes on goals and writing...	87
Figure 6. Aaron’s student and teacher conference notes on goals and writing.....	88
Figure 7. Candace’s student and teacher conference notes on goals and writing.....	89
Figure 8. Salient quotes from goals conferences with students about writing.....	90
Figure 9. Web of students’ ideas on where we write.....	92
Figure 10. Web of students’ ideas on why we write.....	93
Figure 11. A lead created by Kyle for his express and reflect essay through the lead mini lesson.....	110
Figure 12. George’s paragraph written during the description mini lesson....	112
Figure 13. Leslie’s peer reflection sheet in response to Aaron’s express and reflect essay.....	115

Figure 14. Isaac’s student and teacher conference notes on the express and reflect essay.....	117
Figure 15. Aaron’s student and teacher conference notes on the express and reflect essay.....	117
Figure 16. Candace’s student and teacher conference notes on the express and reflect essay.....	118
Figure 17. Isaac’s individual reflection sheet for the express and reflect essay.....	122
Figure 18. Pastiche of mid-study survey results.....	125
Figure 19. Observational notes from students’ collaborative discussions on their inform and explain brainstorm free writes.....	128
Figure 20. Erica’s name research and answers to the reflective questions.....	131
Figure 21. Olivia and Jessica’s haikus constructed from the main idea mini lesson for the inform and explain essay.....	133
Figure 22. Danielle’s descriptive paragraph using the sense of smell.....	135
Figure 23. Isaac’s student and teacher conference notes on the inform and explain essay.....	137
Figure 24. Aaron’s student and teacher conference notes on the inform and explain essay.....	138
Figure 25. Candace’s student and teacher conference notes on the inform and explain essay.....	139

Figure 26. Isaac’s student and teacher conference notes on the final portfolio.....	158
Figure 27. Aaron’s student and teacher conference notes on the final portfolio.....	159
Figure 28. Candace’s student and teacher conference notes on the final portfolio.....	160
Figure 29. Isaac’s introductory reflective letter to his portfolio.....	163
Figure 30. Aaron’s introductory reflective letter to his portfolio.....	164
Figure 31. Candace’s introductory reflective letter to her portfolio.....	165
Figure 32. Pastiche of post-study survey results.....	167
Figure 33. Graphic organizer of codes and bins.....	175

## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study investigated the experiences of creating writing portfolios in a ninth grade academic-level classroom. Twenty students in ninth grade participated in this study conducted in a suburban junior high school containing approximately 870 students in the northeastern United States. Methods of gathering data included teacher observation, student surveys, informal and formal conferences with students, and student work. Methods of analysis included analytic memos, reflective memos, narrative forms, coding, construction of theme statements, and review of student work. The students experienced a writing workshop setting, where they brainstormed, revised, and edited different forms of writing by applying writing strategies learned through mini lessons and one-on-one conferences. Additionally, students regularly reflected on their work and the work of others, compiled their self-selected work in a writing portfolio, and reflected on their overall learning through their writing experiences. Findings suggest that using writing portfolios in the classroom build students' motivation and confidence, foster creativity, allow students to take ownership of their learning, and generate a strong classroom community. Furthermore, teachers who utilize writing portfolios in the classroom may gain insight into students' thinking, which allow educators the opportunity to model and scaffold students' learning effectively.

## RESEARCHER STANCE

“Growth means change and change involves risk,  
stepping from the known to the unknown.”

~Unknown

### From Student, To Teacher, Now Researcher

*Scene I.* A typical classroom sets the scene. Desks are in rows, a blackboard is at the front of the room, as well as a teacher’s desk. Shakespeare notes on *Hamlet* are easily visible to the audience, indicating this is an English classroom.

As the lights begin to ascend, students of sophomore age and dress appropriate to the late 1990s enter stage left carrying books, chatting with one another. A bell rings and students take their seats. A teacher enters the room, rummages around the teacher desk, and picks up a stack of white papers, marked up visibly with red pen. The teacher begins to pass out the papers to each student.

A spotlight appears on one particular student with auburn hair. The teacher hands her the graded assignment. The student looks inquisitively at it, reading the comments. The rest of classroom freezes in motion, as she stands; lights blackout, and only a spotlight shines on her as she expresses her inner thoughts in frustration:

*Another B! I just don’t understand. I thought I followed all the assignment requirements. I paid attention in class when we talked about what*

*was expected. Ugh...but all my comments are about grammar. Apparently I'm not very good at proofreading. What does "comma splice" mean anyway? Oh, well, better luck next time.*

Blackout.

**Scene II.** The scene is set by a different English classroom, 10 years later. Desks are now organized in groups and student work decorates the room. A spotlight rises on the same young girl with auburn hair, now older. She is seated behind the teacher's desk, located in the back of the classroom. She looks frustrated, as she reads over the stack of white papers she just received from her students. She begins to express her thoughts aloud:

*I just don't get it. I thought I taught these students how to fix these problems, yet when I read their final drafts, they just don't make any changes from their rough copies! Do they not get my written feedback? Are they not motivated to improve their writing? I know most students don't like English class, but I was at least motivated to try my best. I even created a rubric so they knew exactly what I'd be grading them on, yet nothing from their end. I'm so frustrated with writing the same comments each time a new writing assignment comes around. You'd think by now my students would know what "needs more details" means.*

She stops for a brief moment, and looks up as if a light bulb has gone on in her head.

*Oh no...what has happened to me? I promised myself I would never turn out like this, yet here I am, giving my students the same vague feedback I received when I was a student. Am I even teaching my students how to improve their writing? I have to find a better way.*

**Scene III. A Researcher's Story.** The scene is set, two years later. The same young girl we have seen grow up into a young teacher now sits on an orange sofa, papers scattered around her, and a laptop in her lap. Dressed in sweats, hair pulled back, she is typing quickly, occasionally looking through the papers around her, as she creates the story of how her experiences as an English student and teacher have led her to the research she shares here.

### **My Research Story**

I am the student turned teacher in this role. I sat and struggled with the feedback I provide students to develop their writing and wondered how I could better motivate my students to understand and make the appropriate changes to improve their final drafts. In response to these concerns, I found myself in graduate school hoping to become a better teacher and facilitator of learning for my students.

I first grappled with research in my classroom by conducting a pilot study on how to better utilize questioning with my students to guide them through a comprehensive understanding of the content I taught in both reading and writing. I experimented with having students formulate their own questions by providing

opportunities to define types of questions and create those questions for student-guided discussion. My findings suggested that giving students the opportunity to formulate their own questions about their learning allowed for more creative, individualized experiences for each student in the classroom. Further, students became motivated to participate during group discussions. Additionally, students seemed to want to find the answers to their own questions because a type of ownership took place for the questions and answers themselves, and the level of content explored went beyond my expectations. Students developed questions on concepts and ideas I never realized they held the capability of creating. Student choice hooked me, and I realized it was a great motivator and insight into what makes students want to participate. Also, by having students develop critical thinking questions, they applied higher-order applications in my classroom because the questions were their own creation.

I then saw myself thinking about the writing instruction I provided students and how it lacked that motivation. My next pilot study took shape. Since I explored questioning previously, I thought about how looking at questioning through one-on-one student and teacher conferences, along with peer conferences, would be a useful next step. I never really sat down and held a conversation with my students about their writing before. I also felt that peer conferences lacked the structure and purpose I wanted them to have in my classroom. In my research, I discovered a series of theme statements that

connected my understanding of student learning and the best practices that facilitate meaning in that learning. I now understand the importance of student and teacher collaboration, how differential instruction helps meet individual needs and builds intrinsic motivation in students, and the need for both teacher and student feedback in both verbal and written form during the writing process. I decided from these findings that regular conferences with students, collaborative writing activities, and peer conferences were worth keeping in my classroom and I consistently use them today.

Although I declared my pilot study on conferencing and collaboration successful, I felt that my conferences and feedback to students were guided solely by me rather than in collaboration with my students' input. Students agreed with my suggestions to their writing by nodding their heads and making the revisions I recommended. I ended up holding the same exact conferences with the same exact students each writing assignment. Students failed to see a connection between each piece of writing and their learning as a whole. They seemed to lack the motivation or the knowledge to understand and apply how what we explored each writing assignment could be transferred to the next one.

As I entered into my next year of teaching, I continued to utilize conferencing strategies and questioning to guide students through the writing process, but found myself sitting at my teacher desk again, frustrated at seeing the same mistakes I already addressed in the last writing assignment. A new group of

students, same set of problems, yet the questioning and conferencing were not enough impact to motivate all my students to connect their previous experiences and knowledge to the writing they currently completed. I needed to add some new strategies to my writing instruction. I looked around my room and saw the bins of writing folders in the back of my classroom. Mere collections of student work piled in individual folders, without purpose or meaning. My “ah-ha” moment took place and my case study began to form. *Writing portfolios might be what I need to motivate students to improve their writing.* Perhaps it was the idea that students saw their learning as a series of individual pieces, instead of realizing the connection that what they learned continued to grow based on previously explored skills. *Portfolios might provide students with that insight.*

### **Need for the Study**

Writing instruction is critical to ensure students understand and comprehend the purposes of their writing. Without meaningful instruction, students all too often lose sight of these purposes. Because my instruction lacked the motivational qualities to guide students to want to change their writing from draft to draft, students did not see the connectivity of skills and knowledge from assignment to assignment. I needed to find a way to make students see their learning as a whole and not just as separate, individual assignments. As Dewey (1997) discusses on the types of experiences students have in education, my students experienced writing, but the quality of that experience was not up to par.

Educators must utilize methods that allow a transfer of previous knowledge and experiences to understanding new ones, cultivating a learning process that is more motivating and enriching to each student. My students did not have a full educative experience that motivated them to activate prior knowledge and reflect upon their learning. It was time I explored ways to create such an experience.

Further, I found my students separating the instruction I gave them on their writing and the actual assessment of their writing. Mini lessons provided students the skills they needed to change their writing, but as I assessed students' final drafts, I continually saw problem areas that I thought I already addressed in my lessons. Students did not see the connection between the two. Instruction did not lead students to make the changes I wanted them to make.

In addition, I noticed that students' motivation was low and the threat of low grades rarely sparked students to try their best. I often listened to students' requests to just "tell them" what to do and how to do it, indicating their loss of interest or motivation to work diligently to achieve their best. This, in conjunction with the need for my writing instruction to change, gave me reason to discover ways to guide students to think about their learning from a different perspective, viewing it as a continual process throughout the year. I found myself in a frustrating position, wanting students to want to learn and do better in their writing, but struggling with exactly how to go about doing it. I started giving in to students' demands to provide them with answers because of limited time

available to cover so much material, but the lack of meaning and authenticity in such instruction led me to fear the disadvantage for which I set my students up for when they entered the real world. Students lacked the connection between the assessment and instruction, along with the motivation to do well. Learning became a series of unconnected events, rather than a process that linked all units of learning together.

In the past, students collected their writing in a folder. The folders gathered dust in the back of my room in bins designated for each class. In the folders, students included their final-draft essays and charted on a sheet within that folder each piece of writing they completed, the grade they received, and what they felt was the best part for each writing assignment. Nothing ever happened beyond that point. I always intended to have students do something with the folders outside what I already asked them to do, but I always made up excuses for myself that involved the use of time. I knew the folders were not utilized the best way they could for all parties involved—teacher and student.

Therefore, it became important for me, as a lifelong learner in my field, to find out how portfolios might provide the instructional tools and insight into student learning that lacked in my classroom. Perhaps portfolios offered teachers and students valuable insight into how learning takes place and the best practices to motivate that learning. Regular reflection, drafting, revision, and conferences facilitated such a process, and such strategies of learning contained exactly what I

desired my students to experience. I wanted my students to feel value in what they experienced in my classroom. I craved for my students not to want me to give them the answers because they viewed me as the expert—I wanted students to ask questions about their own work because they saw themselves as the experts of their writing. Exploring writing portfolios allowed me to see how my instructional strategies might improve from incorporating the methods I tried in the past in conferencing and questioning, allowing my classroom to take on a completely new collaborative approach, and adding additional methods of reflection and goal setting. I wanted students to make goals for themselves that they could reach and feel satisfaction from when they accomplished them in their writing, to discover how to reflect in their learning to find meaning in what they learned, and most of all, to have students uncover a sense of direction and self-motivation. As Dewey (1997) states, “...we must also specify the direction in which growth takes place, the end towards which it tends” (p. 36). Therefore, it became important to know whether portfolio assessment could provide students with such opportunities in my classroom environment, reaching the goals and aspirations I hoped to accomplish in working with my students.

### **Research Question**

After participating in a graduate course on classroom assessment and learning the strategies employed in portfolio assessment, such as student choice, conferences, meaningful questioning, drafting, and reflection, I discovered that

writing portfolios could possibly be the answer to the need for the change in structure and meaning to writing experiences in my classroom. In exploring such avenues, I realized that writing instruction could be driven by the assessment itself, essentially creating an authentic learning experience for my students in which critical skills and knowledge are applied. Therefore, I found myself developing a research question around such an assessment process. My research question became: *What will be the observed behaviors and reported experiences when students create writing portfolios?*

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

“A successful man is one who can lay a firm foundation  
with the bricks others have thrown at him.”

~David Brinkley

### **Introduction**

The conventional assessment model for the classroom is changing. A reinvention of the way assessment demonstrates student learning and accomplishment led educators to question the most effective means of analyzing and assessing student achievement, and how such practices fit into the classroom structure. Balancing different types of assessment is one answer to meeting these needs. When educators utilize a variety of different forms of assessments, such as traditional assessments, portfolios, and performance-based assessments, they can view where a student learns best and accommodate all different forms of student learning. With the increase of standardized assessments in districts across the nation that model traditional formats, teachers realize the need to analyze and implement authentic and performance-based assessments to create a balanced-assessment model necessary to see the whole student as a learner (Burke, Fogarty, & Belgrad, 2002). Biondi (2001) recognized such a need as she conducted an action research project of her own in her fourth grade classroom of 21 students. She noted the many benefits of utilizing authentic assessments, such as portfolios, to accompany traditional tests and quizzes. Her findings suggest that portfolios

provide a format for students to see their strengths and weaknesses, which allow them to construct a plan to address their needs for improvement in specific areas of their learning.

Portfolios additionally facilitate opportunities to assess students' learning over a length of time, marking the steps taken to acquire knowledge and skills, with providing students situations to reflect upon that learning. Literature supports such assumptions of portfolios when they are utilized as learning portfolios—not just a showcase album of a student's best work (Burke, 2005; Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991). As Biondi (2001) states,

I learned more about the 'whole child' who I was teaching. I was able to recognize artistic talents; talents of leadership in students who excelled in interpersonal relationships; musical and dramatic talents of others who were able to apply these special qualities to demonstrate their mastery of the curriculum which we were studying. (p. 19)

Portfolios provide a format for assessment and instruction to occur simultaneously, in order to guide teachers to meet students at various levels of proficiency and enhance their learning. Portfolios in this format provide educators with a view of the child overall as a learner, instead of just a snapshot of their learning at the end of the assessment and instructional process (Pilcher, 2001).

In order to claim portfolios are an effective means of assessment and guide instructional practices that support student learning, areas such as authentic assessment, classroom environment, and specific characteristics of portfolios, such as student choice, ownership of writing, conferencing, and collaboration are essential to explore and outline in support of portfolio assessment. As Hebert (2001) explains, “When teachers gather to focus on a child’s needs there is no limit to possibility of positive outcomes” (p. 18). Such focus is generated when portfolios are integrated into the joint effort of both instruction and assessment in the classroom.

### **Portfolios**

In response to the need to see a student’s entire learning experience, rather than simply a score on a one-time test, classroom teachers integrate alternative assessments that are authentic, meaningful, and proven successful to evaluate student progress and learning. One of these strategies of assessment is a portfolio.

Burke (2005) defines assessment as “the ongoing process of gathering and analyzing evidence of what a student can do” (p. xviii). Although teachers sometimes utilize portfolios in the classroom as a way to collect student work and activities, recently portfolios appear reinvented with a new purpose and usage as a valuable form of continual assessment (Brennan Jenkins, 1996).

Hebert (2001) states that portfolios should be more than a *memory box* of learning, and should demonstrate to educators how and what students learn. A

clear balance of assessments, including a variance in standardized tests along with portfolios, gives an overall outlook on student learning and progress through the eyes of the student (Burke, 2005). In other words, “The portfolio is something that is done by the student, not to the student” (Paulson et al., 1991, p. 61).

Portfolios are more than a general folder in the back of the room to collect student work, but can now transform artifacts with a specific purpose for student learning through this use. They often include meaningful items, such as a decorative and interpretative cover, a letter to the reader, a table of contents, a variety of different artifacts of learning, reflections on those artifacts, self-evaluation materials, a goal-setting page, and conference questions and responses during peer and teacher conferences. Portfolios should not only exemplify a student’s best work, but also show a student’s growth over a length of time through his or her thoughtful reflections and insight on the learning process (Burke, 2005; Claywell, 2001; Hebert, 2001; Paulson et al., 1991; Zubizarreta, 2004).

In general, portfolios in this format illustrate student learning as a whole, integrating assessment into the learning process, not separating the two.

Zubizarreta (2004) calls this type of portfolio a learning portfolio and discusses a portfolio system that is adaptable to many content areas and purposes, consisting of elements that provide a connection between reflection, documentation, and collaboration, as ultimately the best type of portfolio to utilize in the classroom.

In this type of portfolio, students can activate the various multiple intelligences identified by Gardner (as cited in Hebert, 2001) to articulate and facilitate learning experiences that work best with the abilities and strengths that are unique to each student. As Rief, Finnegan, and Gannett (2000) discovered about portfolios in Rief's eighth grade classroom, "A real portfolio is as unique as a thumbprint" (p. 63). Portfolios creatively reveal students' multiple intelligences and distinctive learning styles, while still meeting curricular objectives and state standards. Students construct their own knowledge through structured inquiry, applying content foci and multiple intelligences to create higher-order thinking skills, allowing critical value of learning to be gained beyond traditional, structured school activities (Burke et al., 2002).

### ***Authentic Assessment***

The movement toward stricter standards and an assessment model that are more rigorous has raised the question of which methods of assessment are most accurate in measuring student learning and achievement. In an action research study that implemented portfolios in different first, second, and seventh grades classrooms, Koelper and Messerges (2003) discovered that out of the 44 participating teachers, 68% felt that standardized tests alone could not adequately show student growth. Further, teachers indicated a greater comprehension of student achievement and learning that provided meaningful feedback to how instructional practices could guide student progress by having students create their

own portfolios. Therefore, they concluded a balance is necessary to connect the different forms of assessment in order to understand the depths of student learning. As Helton (1994) discovered researching 52 eighth grade students in a pre-algebra course constructing writing portfolios with word problems, assessment takes place when teachers know and see an overall view of what students understand.

While paper and pencil tests may provide some physical evidence for the concepts and skills a student has mastered, these assessments provide little or no explanation of the student's depth of understanding, ability to apply strategies in different situations, or personal attitude toward the covered material. Therefore, teachers must use assessment instruments that allow for individual strengths to shine. (p. 3)

Authentic assessment, or sometimes referred to as performance-based assessment, became the answer to such concerns about the understanding of student learning. Wiggins (1993) defines authentic assessment as "...engaging and worthy problems or questions of importance, in which students must use knowledge to fashion performances effectively and creatively" (p. 229). Herman, Aschbacher, and Winters (1992) add that authentic assessment should "require students to generate rather than choose a response" (p. 2). Portfolios, a form of authentic assessment, provide teachers the opportunity to view students throughout the entire learning process and not just in the final examination,

capturing students' learning as a whole, as they construct an artifact of their learning experience. As Calfee (1994) states, authentic assessment should include students representing what they actually do and allow for a depth and variety of learning opportunities—in contrast to students guessing the right answer on a test or rigid scoring on a standardized assessment. This can take place through a fusion of standards in the classroom and portfolios as a form of authentic assessment. Portfolios based on standards and aligned with curricular goals provide a stronger visualization of student learning and achievement, along with what students have been engaged in within the classroom (Burke et al., 2002).

Biondi's (2001) research study demonstrates the benefits authentic assessment creates for student learning. Of the 21 students in her class, 81.75% felt more confident in taking a performance-based assessment as opposed to 43.75% feeling confident when taking a standardized assessment. Burke (2005) recognizes the importance of student confidence in the classroom, formulating the connection that grades often influence the self-confidence, self-esteem, motivation, and future of individual students. Placing the weight of all students' learning on one formulized assessment can ultimately provide discouraging results to educators who witness students' growth in the process of learning. Portfolios as a form of authentic assessment represent student learning through that whole process, and demonstrate learning of a student even if standards have not been completely met.

### *Intersection of Assessment and Instruction*

Wiggins and McTighe (1998) suggest that to be an effective instructor of student learning, one must always think like an assessor. In order to achieve this difficult task, they recommend developing constant assessment strategies that benchmark what evidence is available throughout the instructional process that demonstrates students are learning. It is important that assessment and instruction coalesce in order to provide students with enriching opportunities for learning during the portfolio creation. “Portfolios let the child learn from the assessment process while it is occurring” (Hebert, 2001, p. 132). Hebert states that with support and guidance from teachers, a student can collect and view the common themes in his or her learning by making connections, strengthening the understanding of the methods through which he or she learns best.

One of the key aspects that make portfolio assessment a valid form of authentic assessment to incorporate in the classroom is the availability for the assessment to play an integral role in the daily instruction of students. O’Connor (2002) asserts that portfolios blend instruction and assessment so that the two become one fundamental form, and expresses the essential concept that authentic assessment allows teachers to focus on the steps students take in acquiring knowledge, not just the final result of attaining such knowledge. He states, “Teachers will integrate assessment into instruction so that assessment does not merely measure students, but becomes part of the learning process itself” (p. 25).

Pilcher (2001) agrees that such integration is necessary. “Assessment and instruction are not learned in isolation of the other. The theoretical frameworks of learning drive our thinking about how students learn and what we need to do to cultivate their growth” (p. 5). Therefore, when assessment and instruction are integrated with one another, students’ needs are essentially met and learning is achieved.

### *Assessment Over Time*

Portfolios allow assessment to take place during the process of learning and to show students’ progress over a length of time. Burke (2005) clarifies that since students’ learning is never linear and is always changing, assessment should reflect what students acquire during their learning experiences. Writing portfolios offer this experience for students by providing an opportunity for them to gather work in a portfolio, select key pieces throughout the process of collection, and reflect upon those assignments and learning up until the final submission of the portfolio. This allows students to be assessed on their thinking, understanding, and processing skills, and not just the result of that process. As stated by Rief et al. (2000), “Who we are today as literate human beings is intricately tied to our history as learners, especially with regard to reading and writing” (p. 63).

Conducive to this idea are the results of a research study conducted by the librarians at Washington State University Vancouver, assisting the General Education Program to pilot an electronic portfolio assessment process that would

allow each student in the program to meet university learning goals. The research conducted indicated students connected previous knowledge to new knowledge gained in their course work, co-curricular activities, or work experiences.

Individual learning opportunities were no longer isolated and students began to see how each of the learning opportunities were purposeful in depth and meaning, and built upon one another (Diller & Phelps, 2008).

### ***Writing Portfolios***

Writing portfolios are a specific portfolio type for a variety of content area teachers to view their student learning through writing as an authentic form of assessment. Writing instruction and writing development take an important role in understanding how students develop their ideas and draft their written responses. To understand students' writing abilities, some educators gravitate to the idea that writing is a process that takes place over a length of time, and that writing does not accurately represent students' abilities when it takes place in a single, timed session. The writing process occurs in a safe dynamic that involves a workshop setting, providing students the opportunity to experience pre-writing, brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing stages to develop their work. This process is quite favorable to the qualities and characteristics portfolios provide students, allowing them to develop their learning in benchmarked stages of clarification, comprehension, and acquisition of new knowledge. The process of writing guides students' learning and teacher instruction beyond just assessing for

a final grade, but allows students to find purpose and meaning in the work they complete (Leist & Marchewka-Cornwell, 2006).

Writing portfolios can serve and maintain the purpose of seeing the writing process, with understanding and assessing student learning by surrounding a particular theme, identifying student creativity, and recognizing diverse skills. To create a writing portfolio, students include items such as essay drafts, journals, discussion entries, research papers, poetry, publications, concept maps, outlines, and other reflective pieces (Zubizarreta, 2004). Writing portfolios allow students to demonstrate their learning acquisition of writing strategies over the process of creating their final draft (Burke, 2005).

One of the first comprehensive studies on writing portfolio assessment took place in 1990, as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) collected writing portfolios from 4,000 students in grades four and eight from a variety of backgrounds across the United States. Frequently the NAEP collects data from schools around the nation to report on student performance at the national, state, and local levels, providing research results on the best ways to assess school success. The NAEP conducted this particular study to see if portfolio assessment could indicate student achievement in writing proficiency better than standardized, written exams that initiated the writing experience to take place in a timed format. The organization was aware of the rising use of instructional practices that allowed students to develop a piece of writing through

a process that took an extended amount of time, by engaging in brainstorming, drafting, revision, and editing, in addition to critical discussions about their work with parents, teachers, and other peers. Further, the NAEP wanted to see if students' writing abilities could be assessed by utilizing the writing students already completed in class during these process-writing activities, instead of in a standardized testing environment. Although the NAEP discovered some difficulties in utilizing portfolio results to compare students across the nation, they did identify some benefits to utilizing portfolios at the local and school levels to help guide educators to valuable instruction in the classroom. The study revealed that student-writing samples provided the researchers with first-hand information about the writing instruction students experienced in their classrooms, as well as the realization that writing programs should offer opportunities for students to be effective writers in a process of writing. In addition, examining the process of writing could clearly identify the growth of student learning. Often, standardized testing to indicate student ability for writing proficiency occurs in a single setting. Research findings signified that writing assessment through portfolios could provide assessors a better understanding of a significantly larger context of writing assignments instead of just one type of writing (Gentile, 1992).

Further, the study indicated writing portfolios could be assessed to their relevancy of instruction. According to Gentile (1992), writing portfolios “engage students and teachers in evaluative processes that support the goals of the writing

curriculum, ensuring that the assessment is an integral, meaningful part of the instructional program” (p. 76).

### **Student Choice**

One of the core aspects of writing portfolios is the idea that student choice plays a primary role in allowing students to discover and exemplify their skills and abilities through the learning process. “With portfolios, students can put their own spin on standards, exceed expectations, adjust a curriculum to fit their interests, and then show us how they accomplish these goals” (Sustein & Lovell, 2000, p. XV).

One way student choice can be incorporated into portfolios is through individual goal setting. The criterion of choice promotes students to participate in learning activities that allow them to pursue their own goals and aspirations as learners, while still meeting curricular and state standards. Portfolios encourage students to develop independent thinking skills and self-realization by having them create their own learning goals (Paulson & Paulson, 1990). Although learning standards in schools and states are essential for students to achieve and vitally important aspects of education, it is essential to infuse students’ goals, objectives, and diverse backgrounds of learning and instruction, distinguishing that portfolios allow for such diverse understanding of learning and assessment to take place (Burke, 2005).

Oginsky's (2003) study with 20 sixth grade students on goal-oriented learning indicated that when students developed goals based on content standards, and regularly reflected on those goals throughout their learning, they worked hard to achieve their goals. Through this study, each student developed 42 individual goals. On average, each student completed and achieved at least 30 of the goals through the portfolio learning process, indicating the strength of connecting students' personal aspirations to curricular and statewide requirements.

Additionally, Klinger and Nelson's (1996) study on portfolios conducted through 23 at-risk students in writer's workshop revealed goal-setting motivated students to work hard to meet their individualized goals through action plans. Further, students consistently developed detailed reflections on the process of meeting those goals. This integration of student choice through the portfolio learning process is essential in order for teachers to realize that students learn and experience differently than their teachers might. Portfolios foster this continual learning experience to occur for each student meeting his or her own unique needs (Hebert, 2001).

Further, student choice can play a role in the selection of items for the final portfolio. A case study involving three different researchers in a joint research project on the use of authentic assessment in their classrooms, one form being a portfolio, indicated that student choice, particularly in the items selected for the portfolio by the student, played an important role in the success and

authenticity of seeing each student's whole learning (Donovan, Larson, Stechschulte, & Taft, 2002). These researchers realized students "were not merely recorders of factual information" (p. 18). Instead, students could take part in the construction of their learning experiences. Through choice, students were able to pick items for their final portfolios that exemplified what they learned and how they learned it. They realized the importance of not only selecting items that exemplified proficiency, but also items that they struggled with, allowing them to identify where they could continually improve. This finding suggests that students felt comfortable identifying both their strengths and weaknesses, and recognized they could learn from all their classroom experiences.

Student choice can also play a role in the assignments themselves, facilitating opportunities for students to pick topics of interest for research or develop their own ideas of inquiry. In a research study on sixth grade portfolio use, student choice increased intrinsic motivation, indicated through student feedback, greater completion of work, and the willingness to complete assignments (Oginsky, 2003). Overall, when work is based on specific learning goals, linked to the interests of the students, and connected to curricular and state requirements, "The collection of self-selected work and reflections are the real strengths of using portfolio systems" (Diller & Phelps, 2008, p. 77).

Allowing student choice in portfolios does not mean that teachers give up all responsibility in the classroom instruction. Teachers still play a critical role in

working with students to develop ways to organize the portfolio and what items are present for its final submission. The teacher and student learn to work as a team through this process, making critical decisions on how each piece will answer the question, “What have I learned?” (Hebert, 2001; Paulson et al., 1991). Further, teachers act as facilitators of learning to provide effective modeling of writing strategies assessed through the writing portfolio. Since the portfolio aims at guiding students to meet their own personal goals, it is critical that teachers provide students the appropriate skills and knowledge to do so. This can occur through teacher modeling, scaffolding, and guiding students through self-reflection “to discover what they know and what they don’t know” (Brennan Jenkins, 1996, p. 7). As Claywell (2001) describes the writing process “as the opportunity to merge your growing understanding of your writing style with the instructor’s recommendations to create a product you are really proud of to claim as your own” (p. 24), Brennan Jenkins states that this understanding of the writing process is essential for the teacher to continue to provide meaningful instruction to further develop the choices students make in the classroom to foster writing growth.

### ***Ownership of Learning***

Because of the infusion of student choice, the portfolio itself is a personal creation of the student. Students include items that represent their abilities to apply skills and knowledge in an organized and comprehensive manner. Stewart

(2000) states that portfolios “are authentic methods of examining things that students have already ‘learned,’ and, in the process, they ‘relearn’ them, making the material real to them” (p. 34). This allows students to develop as experts of their assessments, taking ownership of what they acquire through the process of creating the writing and assignments placed inside, having some say in the pieces present in the portfolio, and committing regularly to reflection on those pieces and their purpose in their learning journey. The assessment piece is no longer impersonal, but gives students a crucial reason to succeed in the job of collecting, reflecting, and writing the portfolio pieces (Calfee, 1994).

One of the essential skills of 21<sup>st</sup> century students is the need to be more aware of who they are as learners through understanding what strategies work best for them to learn effectively, as they create and solve problems through intricate activities in which they play an active role in the development. “In witnessing the portfolios, we’re looking for clarity, complexity, depth, maturity, and the connection of prior and present learning—all properties that would signal to us that transfer of ownership has occurred” (Hebert, 2001, p. 118). Stewart (2000) recognized such a transfer, as he held conferences with 15 of his undergraduate students to discuss their portfolio creation process. He examined critically what connections students made in their portfolios on issues in education, and how students examined how their portfolios became representations of who they were as learners and educators. He noted in his

findings that students were able to analyze specific items in their portfolios, describe the learning that took place in each item, why they were successful or not, and how they could continue to work to improve as educators. In essence, students demonstrated pride in what they accomplished and developed a plan for where to go next in their learning. Students became their own guides on their education path. As Paulson et al. (1991) state,

Portfolios have the potential to reveal a lot about their creators. They can become a window into the students' heads, a means for both staff and students to understand the educational process at the level of the individual learner. They can be powerful educational tools for encouraging students to take charge of their learning... (p. 61)

### ***Motivation***

When students begin to take ownership of how they will learn and through what contexts, they become motivated to succeed (Zubizarreta, 2004). Student motivation is a direct result of the criteria of the portfolio, such as student choice (Calfee, 1994), student self-evaluation (Hebert, 2001), integrating assessment into classroom instruction (Burke, 2005; O'Connor, 2002), and student-centered teaching (Donovan et al., 2002); therefore, incorporating such criteria into the classroom when generating portfolios is essential for motivating students to want to learn.

As described earlier, student choice is offered to students through generating personal learning goals, selecting items for the portfolio, and self-selecting topics of exploration that fit the assignments for the portfolio (Calfee, 1994). Klinger and Nelson's (1996) examination of the effects of creating portfolios with at-risk high school students note the most successful aspect of the portfolio for them was the use of goal-setting for students to find the motivation to want to learn. Their findings suggest that when students develop their own goals and collaborate with their teacher on a regular basis to devise strategies to achieve their goals, students work hard to meet their desired achievements, take pride in their work, and value the effort and learning that takes place. As Wilhelm (2000) states, "When students are guided to determine their own goals and standards and then to enact them, this self-determination becomes self-definition" (p. 26).

Additionally, using student choice through integrating student creativity in the assignments themselves is an effective means of motivating students in the classroom. Biondi (2001) found in her study on portfolios in her fourth grade classroom that students discussed their reactions to authentic assessment in positive ways, specifically during her student and teacher conferences, describing that it allowed them to demonstrate creativity, facilitated fun in their learning, and provided a chance for them to be unique. Klinger and Nelson's (1996) research with at-risk students in high school yielded similar results, and noted that when incorporating student choice in assignments, students willingly and honestly

shared thoughts and ideas on their writing. Overall, students were less likely to develop fears of writer's block during the writing process when they were given the freedom to make choices in their learning through providing students opportunities to write about topics that interested them. In this particular research study, the participants generated a list of writing topics they considered themselves experts on at the beginning of the year, which fostered such motivation.

Self-evaluation of learning and the learning process is also a key avenue for students to develop motivation to learn in a classroom that incorporates student choice. Portfolios provide an opportunity to view learning through the perspective of the student, strengthening confidence to work hard at learning and developing intrinsic motivation. Hebert (2001) solidifies that teaching students specific strategies of evaluation will allow students to develop confidence to assess their own learning as it occurs over time. A student is often his or her hardest critic. When assessing their own learning, students become motivated to accomplish their own goals and curricular benchmarks when they view their progress through their own ideals of strengths and weaknesses. Biondi (2001) further recognized these results in her case study noticing that students became active participants in the evaluation of their work and a positive interaction in the evaluation process started, demonstrating that they felt motivated to learn because

they found a personal connection to the assignments they completed; therefore, the teaching strategies utilized in the classroom became student-centered.

Motivation is also a marked result of the portfolio creation process because it models the positive effects that take place when assessment continuously occurs throughout the learning process (Burke, 2005; O'Connor, 2002). Zou (2002) outlines the effects of an aligned curriculum and assessment through a research study conducted on the mandated portfolios for the state of Missouri, which required all junior education majors to complete a final portfolio. Results indicated students' displays of confidence and self-efficacy showed considerable increases in working with portfolios. Originally, out of 24 participants, 71% did not feel confident at the beginning of the process—the percentage dropped to 10% at the end of the study. Zou suggests this is a direct result of the alignment among curriculum, instruction, and the portfolio assessment. Therefore, it is important that educators seek to align these aspects in the classroom for students to develop motivation through portfolio creation.

### **Self-Reflection**

Good writers step back from what they work on during the learning process to examine and reflect on what they completed (Brennan Jenkins, 1996). Self-reflection provides students the opportunity to view their entire learning journey. It further allows an insight to teachers on what each student accomplishes in both ability and cognitive thought in connection with the

assignments presented in the final portfolio submission. Portfolio items are not items just put in the portfolio for the submission of grading, but are presented in the portfolio for students to reflect upon and inquire about what they have learned from the materials themselves and why those items were placed in the portfolio. When creating a portfolio, the items in the portfolio become personal to the student and demonstrate the student's abilities to judge the quality of his or her work through the reflection process (Paulson & Paulson, 1990).

Reflection can occur in many different forms within the portfolio process. It can occur at the beginning of the portfolio creation in developing a set of goals for the portfolio, during the process as pieces are developing, and in the end, as a way to see how the learning took place. One way reflection can occur is in a single narrative section in which students reflect on questions designated to decipher what, when, how, and why learning occurred in the items located in the portfolio. These questions can be created with students, aligning them to the insights of both the teacher and the student. In addition, these questions can be posed to students during the writing process (Zubizarreta, 2004).

Another strategy available for student reflection is the use of post-it notes or individual reflections attached to each piece within the portfolio, identifying the learning that happened on each piece. This process allows students to see how each textual piece fits into their learning timeline and at what stage of learning they were at for each particular assignment. It also forms the ability for students

to build continually upon learning through a form of symmetry from assignment to assignment (Burke, 2005; Hebert, 2001).

In addition, Paulson and Paulson (1990) suggest that students write a metacognitive letter about their learning experiences that connects the work in the writing portfolio. This letter should include a rationale and intents of the items, a list of the contents, and a discussion of each piece of writing and why it was placed in the portfolio. Burke et al. (2002) calls this part of the reflection process the inspection phase. This occurs after regular reflection on individual pieces, providing students an opportunity to review goals and create an overview of all collected pieces to show how they work to demonstrate learning and whether or not students are really on track.

No matter what form of reflection an educator chooses for students to complete, student-written reflections can demonstrate how serious students are taking their learning and at what stage of the metacognitive process they are experiencing. When students exhibit detail and connection in their reflections, they begin to experience deeper learning beyond simple identification tasks (Claywell, 2001). Biondi (2001) cites that through self-reflection, students in her fourth grade classroom were able to see actual evidence of their learning over a length of time, instead of in small, sequential areas. The students also began to work independently in a successful manner, with the realization that they were working at the best of their ability. While reflecting upon their learning, students

set goals for themselves that increased their ability to meet standards in the classroom and apply higher-order thinking skills at a much higher rate than other traditional assessments. Helton (1994) experienced similar results when eighth grade students reflected on their writing in math portfolios. Data indicated that reflection facilitated students to utilize and activate higher-order thinking skills. This gave them the ability to clarify their learning processes in the assignments presented in the portfolio.

Personal connections and self-actualization are also a direct result of regular reflection in the classroom. In a large-scale portfolio project of 2,000 secondary students completing a statement portfolio project titled ACT, students included reflective statements about their work and wrote an introductory reflective letter in their portfolios. In this study, research indicated that students began to reveal deep connections about personal statements of beliefs and their own understanding as learners and writers of ability. They also constructed connections to personal goals and aspirations, demonstrating a greater achievement in higher-order thinking through portfolios and the reflection process (Wolf, 1996).

Student motivation and confidence also grow when providing opportunities for reflection in the classroom. Koelper and Messerges' (2003) study indicated that the act of reflecting increased student growth in understanding the process of learning. The 13% of students who felt inadequate

to assess their own work gained confidence and motivation to do so by the end of the study through self-reflection. Because students saw purpose in and felt motivation to complete their work, over time reflective statements became less generic and simple, to deeper and specific, demonstrating a profound understanding of learning and revelation that students comprehend their strengths and weaknesses as learners. In a similar study, when 24 education students completed self-reflective practices, they became aware of their metacognitive processes, realizing the link between the variety of lessons and learning opportunities in the classroom as a greater connected piece (Zuo, 2002).

### **Classroom Environment**

The environment students experience directly affects the positive outcomes of ownership in learning and motivation through choice and reflection students generate when creating portfolios. Specific criteria must be in place for students to feel safe and valued in order to take risks and reveal their inner thoughts to the teacher and other students. Through portfolios, students take charge of their education, developing an environment of collaboration, inquiry, and open communication (Hebert, 2001; Oginsky, 2003; Paulson & Paulson, 1990; Pilcher, 2001; Wilhelm, 2000). Oginsky (2003) noticed the critical role classroom environment played in her sixth grade math class. Utilizing the portfolio assessment process and focusing on these criteria, she revealed through her 20 student surveys that at the beginning of her study, 50% of her students felt

safe in her classroom environment, gaining to 75% percent by the conclusion of the study. Additionally, 90% of students felt they could approach her as a teacher at the beginning of her research, rising to 100% at the conclusion of her work. Therefore, she concluded classroom environment directly affects the success of portfolios in the classroom and plays a critical role in allowing students to activate the positive outcomes of their use through open communication and collaborative thinking. Incorporating ways in which a classroom environment yields safety and is conducive to learning for each student is essential when having students create portfolios that will generate meaningful learning. Individualized instruction through the constructivist approach, student and teacher collaboration, and positive and critical feedback through regular conferencing all encompass this environment.

### ***Constructivist Approach***

Utilizing portfolio assessment in the classroom requires specific environment conditions for the assessment to be an authentic and worthwhile measurement of student learning. The constructivist approach is one criterion for the environment of the classroom to exhibit in order for students to learn effectively. In this type of environment, teachers can address students' learning concerns while the learning is in process, allowing teachers to guide and manipulate their instruction in order to reach all students. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of teaching within each student's zone of proximal development is a

foundation for the constructivist theory. He believed that students learned when teachers taught in this particular zone, which is defined as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential developed as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). Therefore, his theory relies heavily on the idea that students should learn in a social context; through their interactions, they learn from one another’s experiences. Portfolios provide both the teacher and students the opportunity to utilize the constructivist approach in creating a challenging curriculum built around the assessment’s goals for learning, making sure that all students reach those final goals (Pilcher, 2001).

Through the constructivist approach, students develop or create their own learning paths. They find relevance in the curricular content in connection to their own lives and discover achievement through working within content that makes sense to their own learning goals (Wilhelm, 2000). Because learning is not a structured and rigid path that all students follow at the same time and at the same pace, portfolios provide the opportunity to explore learning in directions that meet students’ individual needs and allow for real world connections to construct in the classroom and beyond. This environment occurs when students develop their own goals, work regularly with their teacher and other students to obtain the skills and knowledge to achieve their goals, and consistently reflect on their learning process (Calfee, 1994; Sustain & Lovell, 2000). “When children experience a

school obviously designed with their needs in mind, they notice it and they make us of it” (Hebert, 2001, p. 76). Hebert states that students have a need for control over their learning within the necessary boundaries of school standards and content areas. By allowing students to take some control of their own learning experiences, students develop a worth within the classroom and a place of belonging. Portfolios provide an opportunity for each student to follow his or her own learning path, yet still meet standards and curricular goals.

### ***Collaboration***

The constructivist approach lends itself well to an environment that fosters collaboration between students and the teacher. For successful portfolio implementation, students and the teacher need to work together to assess and guide learning for meaningful comprehension and understanding in all stages of the portfolio creation. Paulson and Paulson (1990) and Calfee (1994) suggest the importance of a teacher who acts as a facilitator of learning—meaning he or she provides instruction that allows students to learn from their own experiences without just dictating answers to questions directly to the students. In essence, students discover their learning on their own through meaningful experiences. They further advise student interaction and input is crucial for the assessment to be successful. Both students and the teacher work together, completing similar tasks, by reflecting, assessing, and guiding each other in the understanding of the artifacts in the portfolio. Both students and the teacher support the learning in the

classroom through reflective feedback on what concepts are acquired and which ones are not. The teacher then utilizes the feedback from students to guide instruction to support learning.

Further, a cooperative environment includes students preparing portfolios over a period of time, gaining feedback and support from other individuals, along with valuable opportunities for students to revise and draft the work that is submitted in the final portfolio based off of the feedback they receive, not just from the teacher, but from other students as well (Calfee, 1994). Learning is a community task, requiring the classroom to develop a communicative feel and need to mentor and guide one another in learning. Portfolios are not an individual endeavor, but an effort in which students share with each other and their teacher through the learning experiences that accompany the portfolio (Zubizarreta, 2004). Cheville, Murphy, Wells Price, and Underwood (2000) discovered this critical component in their study of the Iowa Writing Project (IWP) as a standardized assessment of student learning. Through their research, they discovered the importance of dialogue, collaboration, and the social context of student learning, realizing that students learn best when they can collaborate and discuss their work with several audiences familiar with experiencing the same type of assignment.

A strategy often utilized in the writing process within the environment of collaboration to achieve this interaction is peer conferences. Allowing students to

communicate and discuss their work with one another provides the opportunity for students to examine their learning with other experts who are experiencing the same assignment and learning experiences. Students receive confirmation of what they are doing well, along with critical feedback of avenues of improvement when necessary (Hebert, 2001).

One way peer conferencing facilitates collaboration for students is the ability for students to ask each other critical questions about the assignments in the portfolio. Helton (1994) discovered in her case study that when students met in peer conferences, they demonstrated the ability to express comprehensive work that showed evidence of the ability to clarify their connections and questions to one another, beyond just classroom questions posed by the teacher. Peer conferences became an integral part in the creation of the writing portfolios to the students, in order to clarify questions about items in the portfolio and make connections between student reflections.

Peer conferences yield themselves to other beneficial results in students as well. Liu (2005) additionally analyzed and studied the impact of peer feedback in the portfolio creation process in a course entitled Internet Technology, which included 46 juniors majoring in information management. Using peer feedback facilitated an increase in creative thinking, corrected work, and management skills in students.

In creating collaborative processes, such as peer conferences, it is vital to consider factors necessary for successful implementation. Having an agenda and clear guidelines, along with intense teacher modeling of the process, are essential for peer conferences to be successful. When students make their writing clear to one of their own peers, the process of writing becomes real—it is no longer just an assignment given by the teacher. A purpose is discovered by the students and they begin to want to improve their writing ability (Leist & Marchewka-Cornwell, 2006).

### ***Student and Teacher Conferences***

Although peer conferences provide students an opportunity to receive meaningful feedback from their peers, it does not address the need for students' exposure to applicable skills and knowledge from an expert in the writing process. One-on-one student and teacher conferences construct that missing link. Meaningful collaboration between each student and the teacher is critical in revealing student learning, progression, and understanding of the content presented in the portfolio creation process. These conferences during this process allow this necessary interaction to occur, providing an opportunity for students to engage with their teacher in “meaningful reflection, inquiry, and discussion about their own learning processes” (Burke et al., 2002, p. 192).

First, it is important to indicate such conferences should take place at several stages of student learning, such as brainstorming, drafting, and revision in

order to improve student learning throughout the writing process (Leist & Marchewka-Cornwell, 2006). Resnick (as cited in Flynn & King, 1993) states that because conferences are not occurring only at the end of the writing assignment, teachers can better address students' needs when they most need them through effective teaching strategies, such as teacher modeling and scaffolding. Teachers can provide an opportunity for students to experience effective modeling of writing strategies, showing the student explicit examples of how their writing can improve. By using teacher modeling, Resnick notes students obtain critical thinking skills necessary to assess and improve their writing. Further, the teacher receives opportunities to scaffold through gaining an insight into students' previous knowledge and experiences, motivates students' to learn, and provides an opportunity to validate higher-order thinking skills because of the social situation conferences create.

Hopkins (2002) discovered through classroom research that these teaching strategies yielded such results. When holding individual conferences with her 10<sup>th</sup> grade English students, she enhanced student learning and utilized time most effectively, instead of wasting valuable instructional time to cover material already mastered by many students or that did not apply to all of her class. Hopkins further indicated that conferences led to an improvement in student writing due to the individualized instruction provided for each student. Students

indicated that they felt better equipped and wanted to continue to work harder at their learning because of their teacher support.

Taking note to the tone such feedback a teacher provides to the student during conferences is necessary to mention when applying strategies, such as teacher modeling, to design a platform for student success. The teacher should stay positive with his or her remarks about the student's work, remaining consistent with the criteria outlined through either a rubric, scoring guide, or other grading requirements provided for the assessment. Comments should be clear to the student and provide direct examples that demonstrate ways for improvement. Additionally, the feedback should connect to the student's learning goals (Leist & Marchewka-Cornwell, 2006).

Further, it is suggested that teachers should ensure their feedback is meaningful and relates directly to the student's needs in order for it to serve any purpose. In Hopkin's (2002) study conducted in a 10<sup>th</sup> grade English class that implemented portfolio assessment, results indicated that teacher commitment and meaningful feedback essentially guided students to work proficiently in their writing and make the necessary changes for successful drafting processes.

It is important to note the teacher is not the only one "educating" during the conferencing process. Students play a critical role in revealing and discussing their own work, providing an insight to the teacher what the students learned and how they achieved their goals. Brennan Jenkins (1996) states that when holding

discussions in conferences with students about their work, students should feel pride in their writing by seeing themselves as writers and individuals who direct their own learning choices. Students' achievements become clarified because an educator can hear the students' experiences in learning through their own words.

Stewart (2000) found such results when interviewing 15 students on their portfolios in classroom conferences to discuss individual writing processes. Through these interactions, students demonstrated and articulated a connection between their work and life, along with an understanding of their progress in their writing goals. The process verbalized and directly expressed to the teacher a clarification of how student thinking took place, giving the educator the opportunity to develop lessons necessary to guide student learning. Students did not simply hand in work; students' voices connected to the process of learning and the assessment itself through self-discovery in meaningful conversation. This process is essential because "as children consider the connection between particular pieces of work and what they did to produce them, conversations with their teachers serve to solidify those metacognitive associations" (Hebert, 2001, p. 52); therefore, an educator can better equip his or her lessons in conferences to meet each student's individual needs.

### **Summary**

Portfolios as a design are authentic assessment pieces that allow teachers to gain valuable insight to what their students are learning, how they are learning,

and why they are learning (Burke, 2005; Burke, et al., 2002; Hebert, 2001; Paulson et al., 1991). Writing portfolios are authentic assessments that utilize writing instruction as a process (Biondi, 1991; Burke, 2005; Calfee, 1994; Helton, 1994). Further, it is indicated that portfolios provide students with opportunities to allow for student choice, which motivates their learning, develops their own goals and aspirations, and provides an individualized instructional plan that works best for their needs (Sustein & Lovell, 2000). Writing portfolios offer opportunities for students to improve in their ability to write and provide a type of ownership of that learning to take place (Calfee, 1994; Hebert, 2001; Zubizarreta, 2004). Self-reflection offers students similar opportunities, allowing them to look at each individual assignment in their portfolio and view it as a continual learning path instead of individual assessments (Claywell, 2001; Paulson & Paulson, 1990; Zubizarreta, 2004). Collaboration and an environment that fosters trust and commitment in a constructivist approach are essential in allowing growth to motivate students to explore and work effectively in developing their portfolios as a means of authentic assessment (Brennan Jenkins, 1996; Hopkins, 2002; Oginsky, 2003; Pilcher, 2001). Overall, portfolios provide students with a rich learning environment that allow them to demonstrate their overall learning process.

## METHODOLOGY

“Reasoning draws a conclusion, but does not make the conclusion certain, unless the mind discovers it by the path of experience.”

~Roger Bacon

### Research Goals

A writing teacher’s dream. *A group of students individually working at their desks, rereading their rough drafts on the topic of their choice, analyzing the comments both their teacher and peers wrote and discussed in conferences, making appropriate changes before the final copy. Another student sits next to the teacher, discussing his difficulty with adding vivid description in his text, opening up about the struggles he has as a writer in search of guidance and modeling. He wants to meet the goals he set for himself at the beginning of this writing journey. A few students meet in peer conferences, reading over each other’s drafts, writing down critical comments and praises, verbally telling each other their story and experience with reading the drafts, explaining how improvements can be made. Another small group of peers write reflections on previously assigned papers, describing what they learned from the writing experience and what they can improve on for the next. Other students organize themselves to meet with their teacher for a conference session, gathering up their materials and preparing responses to guiding questions for the discussion.* The literature I explored gave me new insight into the possibility of this classroom

environment becoming reality for my students. Designing this methodology was the guiding light I used to make my writing teacher's dream a reality.

### **Setting**

The school in which I teach is a junior high school, located in a middle class, suburban area in northeastern Pennsylvania. This is one of two junior high schools in the district serving grades seven through nine. There are approximately 870 students in the school; 97% of students are Caucasian, 1% African American, 1% Hispanic, and 1% Asian.

Ninth grade students are either placed in academic or honors courses. In addition to core content classes of English, social studies, math, and science, students are required to take gym, health, and two-elective courses in technology, art, music, the humanities, foreign language, or business. One principal and vice-principal govern the school. Instructional periods are each 40 minutes in length.

Recently our school building underwent a construction project. Fully completed three years ago, the school district layout went from open-concept classrooms or pod-learning centers, to individual classrooms with doors and distinct hallways. Each classroom has its own characteristics based on subject area and content taught, and my classroom is the first you see when you exit the main office. In addition, my ninth grade classroom has a reading center, with a variety of books from different genres for students to sign-out to read during their

free time, or when they complete the required classroom activities. The reading center can be found next to the only window in my classroom and contains two to three chairs for students to sit and read.

My teacher desk and computer are in the diagonal corner of the room, where I also have a student desk and chair located, as a way to communicate to students about their work on an individual basis. A counter and cabinets line the back of my room, where students can locate curriculum materials and textbooks, along with student writing bins and individual workstations. Students can remove themselves from the rest of the room to work on individual work at the counter when appropriate.

A projector connected to my computer, along with two white boards, a bulletin board, and a wall-mounted television offer additional opportunities for instruction. Daily, I write the agenda for the day and any classroom notes, along with the quarterly enduring understanding and essential questions on the white board. A weekly calendar can also be found there, defining the events of the week, daily assignments, and upcoming plans for student work. There is also a bin located in my room for students who are absent. In the bin, students can find the assignments they missed.

In my room, I rearrange student desks and individual chairs on a regular basis, depending on the type of lesson given. My classroom at the beginning of the year is usually arranged in pairs, having two desks next to each other facing

one of the white boards in order for students to complete partner work and begin to feel comfortable working as a community. When students learn to work collaboratively in an effective way, the room arrangement usually changes into groups of approximately four or five students each, depending on the size of the class. In addition, sometimes the classroom takes a full circle structure or a stage structure, where we stack desks on one side of the room and chairs face a staging area in our classroom during reader's theatre activities.

There are many instruments of technology available to use within my classroom by a sign-out sheet, such as laptop carts, document readers, overhead projectors, Smartboards, CPS systems, digital cameras, video cameras, and dvd/vcr players. I also have access to an additional computer lab in the library for instructional use.

### **Participants**

The participants in my study are ninth grade English students located in the academic track level, which indicates they plan to attend either a two or four year level institute of high-education after graduation. My class consists of 20 students with 10 girls and 10 boys. All students provided parent or guardian consent to participate in this study. Additionally, one student has an individual education plan and receives needs-based support in class through the plan within my instruction.

### **Data Gathering Methods**

Before collecting data, I obtained permission to conduct my action research study from the Human Subjects Internal Review Board at Moravian College (HSIRB). I also received approval from my building principal (see Appendix A) and obtained individual parent or guardian consent forms from each of my participants (see Appendix B). All students returned their participant consent forms, indicating their desire to serve as research study participants. After these necessary steps, I created a variety of opportunities to record, collect, and define learning experiences and behaviors in my classroom that were a direct result of the writing portfolio. Hendricks (2009) emphasizes that triangulating the data collected establishes credibility for the study and provides the researcher multiple ways to validate the researcher's data analysis. MacLean and Mohr (1999) define this process as the act of cross checking data from a variety of sources, such as comparing participant observations, student work, and student interviews. Therefore, I created such opportunities of data collection in my research study in order to validate my findings.

### ***Field Notes***

A large portion of my study data consisted of field notes, which I contained in my researcher log. As suggested by MacLean and Mohr (1999), I created a field log entry sheet (see Appendix C) that organized and separated my observational notes from my personal reflections. Additionally, I added a section

that allowed me to go back to my field log notes later on in the study to code and analyze the data or ask further inquiry questions. Taking the research advice of Hendricks (2009), I collected these notes each day of my study during class, first handwriting brief descriptive observations and conversations with students, while also completing student shadow logs. I worked hard at capturing what Fichtman Dana and Yendol-Silva (2003) coin as the “action” in the classroom, by writing down exactly what I saw and heard, leaving out my particular interpretations until I completed my reflections. I later typed up my observations and conducted my personal reflections the period after my research study class period so that my insights and thoughts still remained fresh in my head. This was one of the reasons I chose this particular class to conduct my study. I knew having a prep period that allowed me to sit down with my data and begin reflection immediately after the experience would be helpful.

### *Conference Notes*

Conferences in my research methodology served more than one purpose. First, they allowed me to meet with students to discuss their writing, generating personal mini lessons to construct individualized instruction for each student. Secondly, they held the purpose that Eder and Fingerson (2002) note as a time to provide the opportunity for students to voice their opinion on the occurrences in the classroom and how it affects their learning.

Students met regularly in student and teacher conferences on their writing assignments and portfolio creation. Students brought materials and reflection items to the conferences. During the conferences, I gathered notes of student dialogue and observations on a conference log entry sheet (see Appendix D). I again developed a formatted chart that allowed me to separate my observations and student conversations from the interpretative reflections I formulated after the conference. This allowed me to notice trends, ideas, and themes in the writing portfolio process, along with guide necessary instruction and teacher modeling in class.

### ***Student Work***

Fichtman Dana and Yendol-Silva (2003) state, "...schools and classrooms naturally generate a tremendous paper trail that captures much of the daily classroom activity" (p. 71). I regularly collected summative and formative assessments, such as goal sheets, written drafts, brainstorming, journal entries, peer reflection sheets, free writes, and additional class work that occurred within and outside the writing units while the study took place. I reflected upon student work to decipher what themes or reoccurring ideas developed in response to the portfolio process in daily reflective journals. These reflections accompanied my field log notes. Compiling this collection of data allowed me to view through the lenses how my lessons and activities directly influenced student achievement and learning.

### ***Student Reflections***

MacLean and Mohr (1999) recognize the importance of collecting data that incorporates students' points of view on the work and achievement they complete on each assignment. Therefore, as part of my methodology, students regularly reflected on their work using a format that provided an opportunity for me to present individual feedback to that student on an individual reflection sheet (see Appendix E). A student reflection PMI chart (see Appendix F) allowed me to examine trends in student reflections to see if students noticed anything particular about their learning and how students understood the learning process overall. I filled out this chart at least twice for each student based on the reflections students compiled in their final writing portfolio, documenting the depth of reflective thought.

### ***Student Surveys***

“A survey or questionnaire gives you a broad base for understanding your students' ideas in regard to your research question, a profile out of which a more specific study may take shape” (MacLean & Mohr, 1999, p. 41). I utilized a pre-, mid-, and post-study survey (see Appendixes G, H, & I) to obtain yet another scope of understanding of students' perceptions during this study. Through this data collection method, I began to recognize any trends, themes, or setbacks that occurred throughout the study, along with any changes in attitudes toward writing, class assignments, and assessments as time progressed.

### ***Researcher Log***

I endeavored to remain organized through this research study, ensuring the validity of my findings. I compiled all my conference notes, field log notes, student surveys, student work, written reflections, and additional study materials together, in chronological order, for ease of reference and analysis into my researcher log.

### ***The Writing Portfolio***

McLean and Mohr (1999) define these particular pieces of student work “gold mines of data, especially when students have done some evaluation themselves” (p. 38). The final submission of the writing portfolio anchored my ability to recognize and evaluate student learning as a whole. I added notes and reflections on each student’s portfolio to my field notes and included them in my researcher log.

### **Trustworthiness Statement**

I worked consciously as a trustworthy individual who collected, analyzed, and interpreted data within the necessary guidelines of ethical research. Throughout my research process, I consistently maintained open to the variety of viewpoints presented in the data and observations, embracing results that were both positive and negative in relation to the expected results I anticipated, understanding the importance of reporting results that might not support my original hypothesis designed. As Lyman (as cited in Ely, Vinz, Downing, &

Anzul, 1997) states, “The ‘truth’ is implicated in a series of shaping discoveries rather than in a search for some elusive ‘right’ way of describing” (p. 36).

Therefore, it became critical for myself, embarking on this research, to explain the story of my classroom, to be aware of the personal understandings and opinions I uphold on the world around me.

Additionally, I remained open to unexpected findings in the students I observed, by examining viewpoints, work samples, observations, and additional data, realizing that my research on writing portfolios might take me down different avenues of exploration than I originally anticipated. Following the ethical guidelines necessary to conduct worthwhile research, I continually acted as the framework for ensuring the validity of this research study on writing portfolios.

### ***Acknowledgement of Researcher Biases***

Great literature, a need to express my own ideas and thoughts, and the desire to guide others to success are what drove me to pursue the career of an English teacher I have today. My passion for the English language, the way it is formulated and manipulated to express an individual’s thoughts and actions never ceases to amaze or inspire me to create meaningful experiences in my own classroom for my students to grasp such enthusiasm in their language. I have always set foot in an English classroom, despite the teaching techniques or formatting of the class, and established a foundation of comfort and understanding

in the reflective thinking practices that take place when an individual reads and writes about his or her own experiences or those of others. In contrast, I often hear repeatedly the discouraging words spoken by students who despise English class, concentrating specifically on the routine drill and skill of grammar experienced in the past, or the lack of wanting to read a story or write out something on a sheet of paper they have no interest in. Years of inconsistent practices, being told they cannot do it, or less than worthwhile teaching strategies have led students to conjure up an imprinted image of English class as being dull, unsettling, and boring. I often search with finding a connection to these students when my passion drives me to bring them to a better understanding of the power of language and the written word. Yet, despite best practices and countless real-world connections, some students will not bond with reading and writing the way I did as a young student and still do today. Their attitudes and emotions shaped quite differently from mine due to their variant life experiences. Because of these realizations, I recognized the importance for me as a researcher to attempt to understand these qualities, knowing that not all students would feel the same passion towards the writing process, reflection, and portfolio creation as I do as a teacher directing the learning experience. Capturing such a viewpoint became critical in telling my research story.

As any good teacher will do, I hold high regard for student success in my classroom. I expect on a daily basis that all students come to class willing to

learn, experience, and try their best to be successful in whatever we set out to accomplish. At the age of 14 or 15, though, students are often at quite a different stage of understanding of the process of learning or do not appreciate the value of learning new things and having innovative experiences. Their self-perception lacks the qualities of awareness and confidence that allow them to step outside the box and take a chance. My experiences growing up, performing for others through acting, singing, and instrumental music, led me to appreciate these important aspects of learning at an early age, though it is safe to say many students have little familiarity with the same background. When students do not take the opportunity to succeed or take chances when they are afraid to do so, I sometimes get frustrated. I want the classroom I facilitate to welcome success for everyone, yet this is not always the case. While conducting this research, I remained open to the notion that not all students would flourish in a constructivist learning environment, through writing workshop, in collaboration, or as a result of student choice. I remained open to these possibilities to ensure validity in my research study.

Students will complete assignments in a timely manner, finish homework on time, and be eager to take chances outside their realm of comfort in order to grow as an individual and learn—at least these are the philosophies that guide my understanding of what aspects a motivated learner must employ. I like to take chances in what I do. I willingly try new things because of my understanding

through the experiences in my own life that make life worth living. I do so through my teaching practices in my enthusiasm to explore different techniques and conduct this very research study. I worked hard as a graduate student to make sure assignments met acceptable criteria. I cannot reflect upon a time in my educational career that I did not try my best to get an assignment in on time and complete it to the best of my ability, yet I continuously work with students who do not uphold the same set of values toward work ethic. I can easily get bothered when I feel as though I have exhausted all avenues possible in motivating students, providing them multiple opportunities to improve, yet the students choose mediocrity. As Ely et al. (1997) explain, "... we need to be conscious of what causes us to be startled, provoked, angry, or challenged by the material and meaning of our studies" (p. 37). Awareness of the different perspectives and experiences held by my students provided invaluable insights as I analyzed and interpreted the data I collected.

MacLean and Mohr (1999) suggest the use of teacher support groups during the research process to add another viewpoint of what assumptions can be made during the analysis of data collected. "Research groups support the process of analysis—keeping the focus on what's going on—and the support is mutual" (p. 21). Meeting with my teacher support group helped me see the viewpoints and opinions of the students described that might hinder my understanding of how biases on my own behalf reveal the true understanding and meaning of my

research data. Critically examining the feedback constructed by my support group gave me the opportunity to see how I could best address and reveal the impact of writing portfolios on students with different understandings and beliefs contradictory towards my own.

Further, the triangulation of my data ultimately ensured the testament of my understanding of the effect of writing portfolios in my classroom. Written observations in whole and conference classroom settings, the collection of student surveys at a variety of points in the study, critical analysis of student data through a collection of student work, including individual writing assignments, peer edit sheets, revised drafts, and the final student portfolio, offered a clear understanding of how writing portfolios and the writing process through this experience led to the outcomes outlined in my findings. Examining my study through a variety of lenses ensured that the value of my interpretation of daily observations in my field notes became valid and concrete, essentially detailing the “relationships between facts, truth, reporting, and opinion” in the final presentation of my research (Ely et al., 1997, p. 36). Flexibility was my crux to depend on as I worked at developing meaning in the descriptive and detailed data presented in my field notes, identifying where my observations started and my reflections mixed in—finding meaning in how both worked together to understand the story of my students’ experiences.

### *Ethical Guidelines*

In order to ensure my study met the ethical guidelines required, I began by obtaining permission to conduct my research study through the HSIRB at Moravian College. I then received permission from the principal at my school. After this step, I introduced my study to its participants, explaining the core components, and compiled signed consent forms from a parent or guardian of each individual participant. Students were informed that they could choose not to participate in the study or could withdrawal at any time without penalty, along with clarification that pseudonyms would be utilized to ensure anonymity of each individual student participating in the study.

As recommended by Holly, Arhar, and Kasten (2005), I included student input for clarification of my collected data as often as possible. Building a community of trust and openness was not only critical for the trustworthiness and validity of this study, but also necessary in order to conduct the actual research of writing portfolios. Providing students the opportunity to clarify statements in my field notes, express themselves openly in surveys, and discuss their understanding of content and the purpose of writing portfolios in individual conferences, created a foundation for such an environment. Knowing that these experiences in the classroom took place in the strictest confidence ensured that students remained open and honest about their experiences, whether positive or negative. Students further understood that I needed to report any information that was illegal in

nature or harmful to their well-being, if necessary, to the proper authorities within the school.

Self-reflection was the key to identifying ways in which my individual values fit into my research findings and understandings of what happened in my classroom. As recommended by Bogdan and Biklen (2002), frequent memos and visualizations based on observations and data led to emerging themes and speculations of the impact of writing portfolios on my students. Beginning the data analysis process during the researching stage ensured that I met my students' needs throughout the entire writing portfolio process.

### **Methodology: Timeframe of Study**

#### **Summer, 2009**

- I received HSIRB approval for my study and attained consent from my building principal.
- I continued to research similar studies and other salient literature in support of my research inquiry. As a result, I completed a written review of the literature.

#### **September, 2009**

- I explained teacher research and my study to my participants. I obtained parent/guardian consent forms from my participants to conduct this study.
- I conducted a pre-study survey.
- We engaged in several cooperative group activities to build a supportive classroom community.
- Students generated a writing territories list and collage (a method to brainstorm ideas for writing).

- I assigned a baseline writing assessment.
- We discussed the purpose of writing in today's society.
- Each student generated writing goals for the portfolio. I held conferences with each student about his or her goals and general feelings about the writing process.

**October, 2009**

- Students wrote their express and reflect essays through a writer's workshop, which involved brainstorming free writes, regular mini lessons, one-on-one teacher conferences, revision, editing, and peer reflections. I assessed their final drafts through a rubric.
- Students continued to add additional writing items from other units to their portfolios.

**November, 2009**

- I modeled the reflection process for students. Students wrote their first formal reflections on their express and reflect essays and one other piece in the portfolio.
- I conducted a mid-study survey.
- The next writing unit, inform and explain, began. Students completed free writing activities to brainstorm their ideas.
- Students wrote their inform and explain essays through a writer's workshop, which involved regular mini lessons, one-on-one teacher conferences, revision, editing, and peer reflections. I assessed their final drafts through a rubric.
- Students continued to write reflections on the pieces placed in their portfolios. They continued to add additional writing items from other units to their portfolios as well.

**December, 2009**

- Students created a resume for the next writing unit. Students learned how to construct a resume through teacher modeling and completed some career exploration. I conducted informal conferences with each student because of the format of the writing assignment.
- I reviewed the portfolio creation process with students. I provided instructions on how to set up the portfolio and the introductory reflective letter.
- A writing workshop took place as students selected items for their portfolio and finished individual reflections for each piece. They also completed additional peer reflections, wrote their introductory reflective letters, and conducted one-on-one teacher conferences.
- Students handed in their final portfolios and we held a portfolio celebration.
- I conducted a post-study survey.

## THIS YEAR'S STORY

“Experience is always sowing the seed of one thing after another.”

~Manilius

### First Day Jitters

I remember my sixth grade year, entering middle school for the first time. I was at my summer orientation program held just a few days before school was about to begin. I sat relatively calm, yet the hundreds of butterflies in my stomach anxiously completed jumping jacks as I thought about the changes about to begin. A new school building, new friends, new teachers, lots of uncertainty. Educationally, I was ready. Mentally, I felt scared to death. The principal took the stage. She spoke with energy and excitement, exclaiming how nervous she had been the past few weeks—not being able to eat or think clearly because of all the changes and anticipation a new school year brings. I remember thinking, *yeah right. You, nervous? You do the same thing every year. You don't have to make new friends, make sure you are to class on time, or try to fit in. I'm the one that should be nervous, not you. You're an adult.*

At that age, I did not realize the same feelings I had as a student starting a new school year were often the same feelings teachers and administrators exhibit as well. Same anxiety, slightly different reasons. *Will my students like me? Will I motivate my students to learn? Will my class be of any value to them?* As I began the 2009 school year, my anxieties got to me more than usual. Even after

four years of teaching, my nerves always seemed in flux at the beginning of the year, and this was especially true at this point in my career, embarking on the unknown journey of teacher action research. After a summer full of reading literature, preparing units, and some much deserved relaxation, I worried and feared the challenges of this school year would take the best of me. Not only was I taking on this study, but I was now assigned to teach two additional eighth grade English classes and direct our school musical. It was going to be a challenging year, but I worked hard at convincing those nervous butterflies that I had survived challenges in the past—this one would be no different in that regard.

Before I knew it, the first day of school arrived. With my classroom bulletin boards neatly decorated, desks clean and aligned in pairs, supply closets filled to the brim, bookshelves organized, and two new plants adorning my only window, the physical space was ready to go. This always calms my anxieties a bit, but not enough to keep me from worrying about the real challenge—meeting my students. After a day of getting to know my students in my other classes and reviewing the expectations for this year, my eighth period entered and I prepared to embark on the journey that I was certain would be...well, I was not certain it was going to be anything beyond a challenge and perhaps that is what scared me the most.

The bell rang and students began to file into the room. As in my previous classes, most students entered rather quietly as they read the instructions I

presented on the projector screen to pick up the handouts for today's class. They picked up the materials they needed for the day and sat in a seat of their choice, as the bell rang for class to begin. A typical first day unfolded as I introduced myself and talked about the expectations for my classroom. I introduced my grading policies, the curriculum, and my general guidelines for rules and respect. Students received a folder and a class journal that I asked them to write their names on. These materials would be utilized throughout most of the study and beyond. I asked students to share some information with me about themselves, filling out a multiple intelligence survey (see Appendix J) and preparing a short introduction to the class telling something interesting that happened over the summer or something unique about them that the class may not know. This experience was the first for students to talk and give insight to me of their own personalities.

As the mood of the room began to change from quiet and reserved to collaborative and inquisitive, it was time for me to present my study. As I explored with my students the concept of conducting a study as a teacher, their role as students, and how I would take notes on classroom behaviors and experiences, I expected cheers from the crowd, proclaiming I was the best teacher ever for doing this. Instead, I received blank stares, no emotion. I asked students if they ever experienced a classroom where a teacher conducted a study. No one answered. This was a new experience for all of us and I needed to keep my

students in the loop of understanding if I would hook them through this process. Students were still trying to figure out whom I was and what this class was going to be about. *Is this a safe place for me to talk and be myself or what?* As my students tried to answer this question for themselves, I continued to reflect and evaluate how I might work with getting to know these students and what I might do to make sure they found a safe place in my classroom.

I handed out participant consent forms, explained basic study procedures, and asked students to take home the forms and return them by Monday. As the class period ended and the bell rang, one student, Aaron, stated, “Wow...sounds like a lot of work...but cool.” I felt pleased to receive some insight into one student’s thinking about this new experience. The first day was over. Those nervous butterflies finally subsided. Maybe my students would take on this new idea of researching my classroom and become partners in learning. As I sat down at my desk as the first day ended, I reflected:

*The dreaded (and I mean that positively) first day is over. And with some success. Can’t wait to get started on this study and working with these students. It is cool. This whole process is going to give me a new understanding of what my students’ experience through their voices. Not only that, it is going to give me a new understanding of what I experience.*

## **Grammar, Punctuation, and Spelling:**

### **The Essentials of Writing, Right?**

Day two started with the collection of 12 consent forms from students—12 more than I expected because the due date was not until the next day of school. Students once again entered the room following the directions on the projector—this time to pick up the pre-study survey. I reassured students that they would not be graded on the survey, but that the feedback was for my study to see what writing experiences were like for them before entering my classroom. With my students first getting to know me, I knew validating their survey responses through class work and observations was critical. I spent much of the next week compiling “background” information on my students and building a supportive classroom environment. I felt that the questions I asked in this survey were considered the “building blocks” students experienced as writers; knowing where one has come from in his or her writing experiences in the past, why one writes, and how one makes writing better. Having a strong core understanding of these concepts of my students allowed me to work at building upon the foundations of my students’ prior knowledge to expand their writing capabilities. I attained a better understanding of students’ experiences and previous knowledge with writing instruction, understanding what strategies worked best for students’ learning and what did not work for them in the past. To see the relationship of these responses, I took students “building blocks” and created a visual pastiche

(see Figure 1), juxtaposing the information students provided me from the surveys that summarized the most common responses, or the ones that stuck out, to gain a snapshot of students' past experiences with writing instruction.

I grew intrigued by their responses. Based on the pre-study survey, students stated that they learned how to write from their teacher or at home. They explained that most people write to communicate, express their feelings, or to understand things. Students articulated they wrote to communicate, express themselves, or because they were told they "have to." According to students, it is important for them to learn how to write well to attain a good job.

Overwhelmingly, students stated that a well-written piece of writing contains good grammar. Additionally, students expressed that good writers have a broad vocabulary and creativity.

Students indicated in their surveys that revision to them mostly meant correcting their "mistakes." A few students mentioned structure, but not a single student mentioned changing ideas. Students stated that good writing teachers they had in the past made them write a lot, critiqued their work, and were persistent. Most students stated they were not good writers. Students who did state they were good writers indicated they were proficient because they were imaginative. Students who felt they were not good writers stated so because they had poor grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

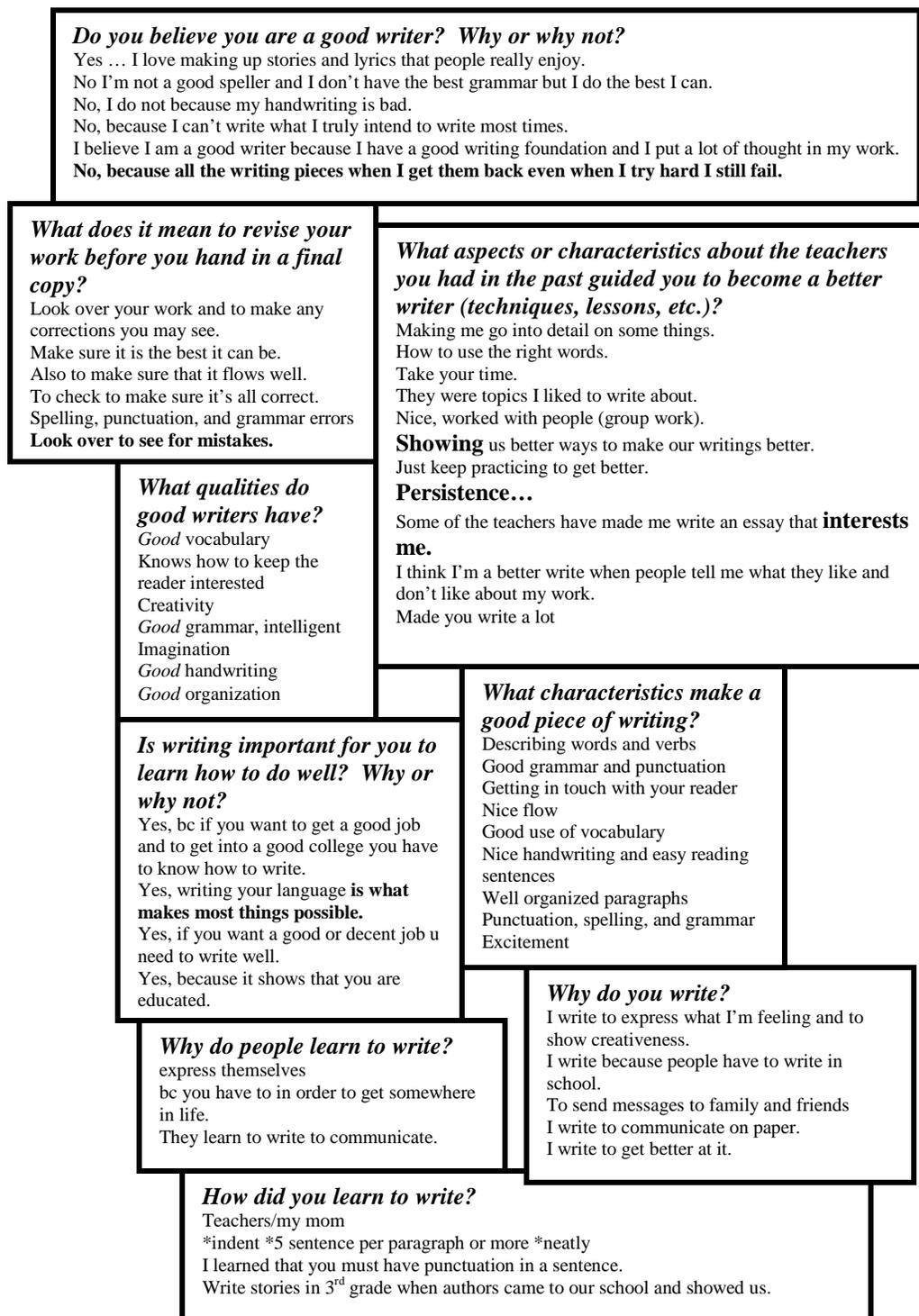


Figure 1. "Building blocks" pastiche of pre-study survey results.

In reviewing these findings, I realized I would need to incorporate lessons that motivated students to write, along with create the opportunity for students to look beyond just the grammatical errors on the paper or what I believe they referred to as “mistakes.” The editing process was not the only process I wanted my students to experience, since this appeared to be where students received the most feedback from in past writing experiences. It would be necessary for me to include lessons that modeled the revision process for students, genuinely improving their writing content and structure. Additionally, I realized that it would be crucial to provide positive and meaningful feedback to individual students who felt they were not good writers and to continue to challenge the students who felt they were. To do this, I would need to incorporate regular mini lessons on writing, model the revision process, actively participate in the writing workshop with students, and complete individual student and teacher conferences to provide meaningful feedback to student writing. After the pre-study survey process, it became apparent to me that this writing portfolio would be just as beneficial for me as a teacher learning about teaching strategies, as would be for my students learning how to become motivated writers.

### **Building a Period Eight Community**

After students completed the surveys, I provided a handout on the writing portfolio process (see Appendix K) explaining how the portfolio would be generated and what our writing workshop sessions would look like. I showed

students the bins on my side counter where the writing folders that would collect our writing materials would be stored until they would magically be transformed into collections of reflections and written drafts of work. Well, I knew it would not be magic, but I hoped that it would be a dramatic transformation.

At the end of the discussion on portfolios, I asked students if they had any questions about the process. Of course, there were none, but I knew that this particular teaching strategy of asking students for questions about what I just instructed in a classroom environment not yet deemed safe was not very effective. Therefore, I knew that I would need to continually review this writing portfolio process with students and find ways to clarify their unanswered questions through other means. Meeting through individual conferences and building our classroom environment within the next few weeks would certainly help this process.

It was time to begin the writing process. I introduced the method of generating writing territories and a writer's collage. These basic activities allowed students a plethora of brainstorming ideas they could reference for many of the writing activities we would go on to complete this year. To explain these processes, I modeled them for students by preparing my own writing territories and showing them example collages from years past. When students create a list of writing territories, they create a list of topics or ideas for which they are experts. Modeling this process, I projected my own list of territories on the screen

(see Figure 2), explaining that the list can contain people, topics, objects, ideas, experiences, and any thing else that comes to mind.

*Mrs. Binkley's Writing Territories*

My Husband	Public Speaking
My dog, Sport	Riding a bike
Beagles	Hiking
In-laws	Snorkeling
Parents	Swimming with sting rays
Being a middle-child	High and low ropes courses
Having a younger, spoiled brother	College stories
Reading	Fireworks
Writing	Photography
Music	Scrapbooking
Musicals	Fashion design dreams
Playing the flute, piccolo	Interior design
Playing the piano	Becoming an aunt
Playing basketball	Buying/selling a house
My concert history	Television
My many hairstyles	Beach house vacations
Ex-boyfriends	Sun poisoning
Ex-best friends	Millersville University
Dating stories	River rafting
Teaching stories	Kayaking
Memorable students	Holiday Inn Express
Memorable teachers	Guest Services Rep.
Learning to drive	Golfing/Center Valley Club
My first year teaching	My bike accident
NYC	TV News in junior high
Family trips to Texas	Self storage
Seeing the Colorado Rockies	Drawing-sketching
My first cruise	art classes
Punta Cana, Dominican Republic	Planning a wedding
Field trips	Decorating for the holidays
My Aunt Lisa	My extended family
My Grandpa Frantz	Camping
HS practical jokes	My two best friends

*Figure 2.* Mrs. Binkley's writing territories used as teacher modeling.

The room was a buzz. Whispers and questions about what topics were on my list and why filled the room. *You kayak? I'm a middle child too! I went on a cruise two summers ago. We go to New York City this year, right?* Student interest piqued, even if it was interest in what I was all about, and that made me excited. It was a sign to me that students felt motivated to learn about me as their teacher just as much as I wanted to learn about them.

Next, students generated a writer's collage. The collage became the front of the writing folder handed out on the first day, as the writing territories were written on the back. Therefore, they could both be referenced easily when in writing workshop. I provided an assignment sheet (see Appendix L) and showed students examples from past years, explaining that the collage should cover the entire front of the folder and contain pictures that either reference or add ideas to the writing territories list. I explained the pictures could be cut outs from magazines, photos, or small items that could be glued on the folder. Completing both of these activities benefited students to brainstorm ideas for writing because some students react and respond to visualizations, while others respond well to written words. I turned the rest of the period over to the students to allow them to finish these brainstorming activities. I spent that time working with students like Bianca, who struggled with identifying her own writing territories without only listing people and Isaac who struggled with coming up with more than 10 writing territories, by showing him how to branch off experiences into smaller, detailed

topics. I checked off the first two days of the year as successful and moved into a groove of getting to know my students.

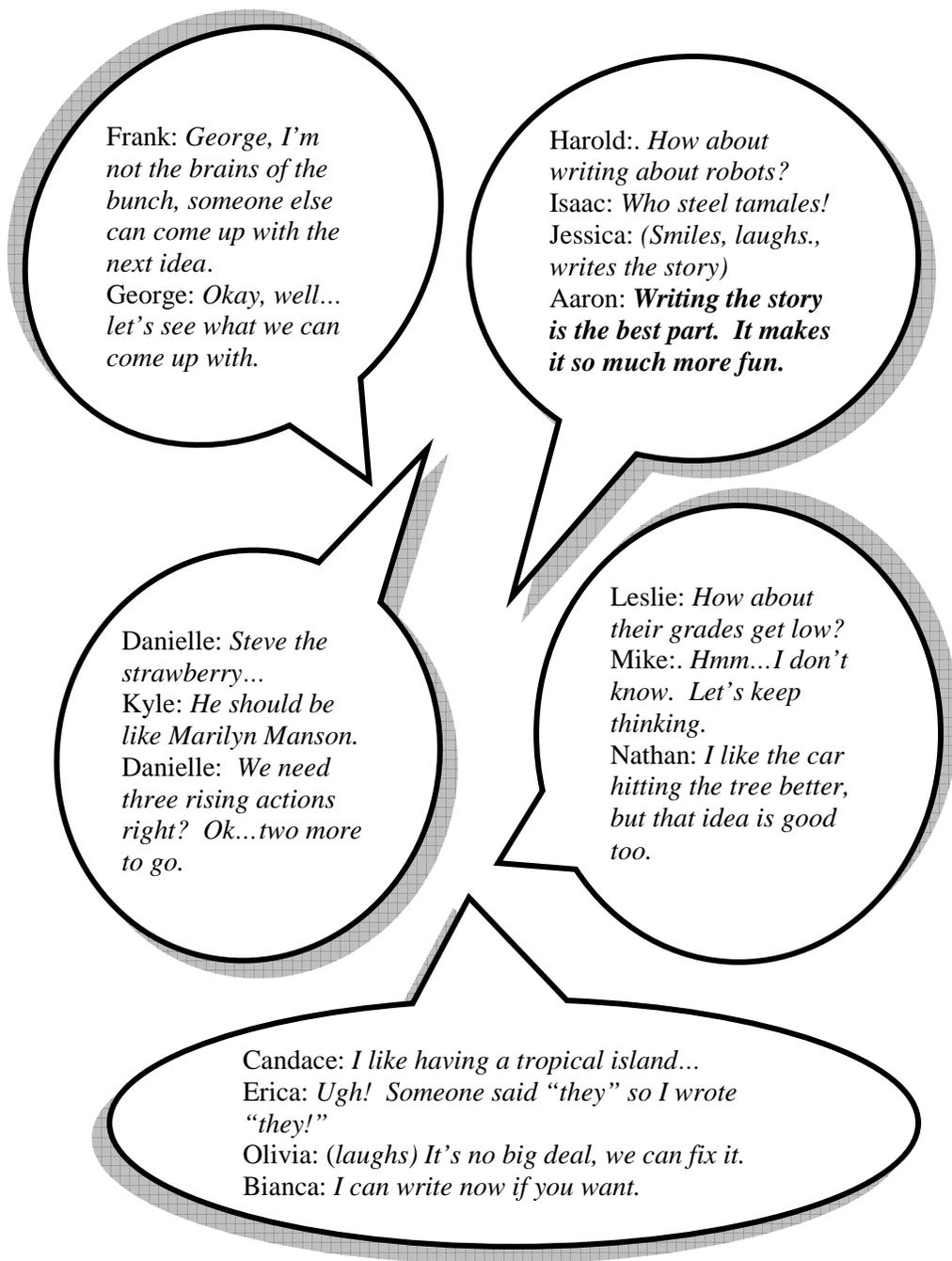
Labor Day weekend passed, all students' consent forms had been turned in, and school was really ready to begin. I needed to start reading units adjacent to my writing portfolio study and introduce the baseline writing assessment based on students' required summer reading novel. I dedicated the next week of school to these very topics. Although the reading units were not part of my study, some of the activities directly affected my study on writing portfolios.

To create a collaborative and supportive classroom environment, I found it important to have students begin to work together to discuss, create, and explain ideas. I decided to tie together my reading unit on fiction that utilized collaborative learning processes to my writing study, to create a classroom environment conducive to one desired to implement writing portfolios effectively. I asked students to create their own fictional story, modeling Freytag's Pyramid, a visual design that outlines the basic elements of a dramatic story. I also asked them to include in the diagram literary elements, such as setting, character development, and theme. I randomly split students into groups of four to complete this lesson. Students received a large piece of paper to draw out their Freytag's Pyramid, writing their story around their diagram. I encouraged students to be as creative as they wanted to be, and that their story could be about anything they wanted. Students began to work and I focused on my observations.

Students collaborated, joked, laughed, and showed creativity. They remained on task, involved in the process. They included all classmates while discussing in their groups. To capture the essence of this experience, I developed a diagram illustrating a snapshot of all that occurred during the class period as I experienced it for myself, observing my students (see Figure 3).

I had creative students; that was easy to see. I knew this creativity would play to my advantage because student choice was the driving force of writing instruction. For the most part, students displayed actions that demonstrated they welcomingly and willingly listened to each other's ideas.

After students collaborated and created their stories, developed visualizations to accompany their stories, added literary elements, and formed a descriptive title, each group presented their story to their classmates. The amount of respect students gave the groups while they shared their stories to the class pleased me. Students listened to presentations quietly, and expressed enthusiasm in hearing other students' stories. Further, I did not have to coax students to share. A classroom community began to form.



*Figure 3. A snapshot of students' conversations during the Freytag's Pyramid activity in a collaborative setting.*

### **Baseline Writing Assessment**

Intermixed with the workings of developing a classroom climate through writing fictional stories was the baseline writing assessment. Over the summer, our district required students to read from a selected list of novels in preparation for the upcoming year. Once they returned to school after their summer break, students completed an assessment based on their reading. Our ninth grade curriculum included a writing assessment for students to develop a letter to a character in their novel, reflecting on whether they agreed or disagreed with a decision the character made, supporting it with evidence from the book. When developing my action research methodology, I realized that this assessment would also provide the perfect opportunity for me to have the students submit a baseline writing piece. The rubric created assessed the basic elements of writing, and I could see how students' previous experiences outlined in their pre-study surveys compared to their writing.

I began by handing out the assignment sheet (see Appendix M) and rubric (see Appendix N), reviewing the directions for the baseline writing assessment. Because this was a baseline writing piece, I decided not to provide any additional writing instructions, other than the actual assignment directions, in order to see how the pre-study survey results aligned with the baseline results. I did however, find it important to start working with students, modeling ways in which to continue to brainstorm their ideas and to work on motivating students to

interact and collaborate with one another in preparation for future writing units. Therefore, I handed out a brainstorming worksheet (see Appendix O) to motivate students to think about how to organize their writing and list what important points they might consider placing in their text. It was important for me to see how students could take these tasks and generate them through writing processes they had already been instructed through—then, I would see what I would need to do to assist students in the writing process for our upcoming units. I explained to students that I would use this piece as a baseline writing piece, that I would be more lenient in my grading because I would not be giving any writing instruction on how to improve their writing, and that this essay would serve as information for me on their writing practices.

After giving instructions on the assignment, I allowed students to work on the brainstorming activity and begin their letters. I offered students the opportunity to work with a partner who had read the same summer reading book as them, and many students took advantage of such an opportunity. I gleamed, knowing that students were willing to work with one another, sharing ideas and brainstorming. Observing my students formulating the beginnings of collaborative relationships, I wrote:

Bianca: (*glances at Leslie*)

Leslie: (*shakes her head “yes,” as she moves her seat to sit next to*

*Bianca*)

Bianca: *Did you like this book?*

Leslie: *It was okay. I liked the diary entries that were used. It was probably the best book on the list.*

Bianca: *Well, let's see. What decisions do you want to list?*

Leslie: *How about we start with his decisions at school.*

Bianca: *Sounds great. Hmm...we're going to have a lot of decisions.*

*Mrs. Binkley? (raises hand and waits)*

Mrs. Binkley: *(coming over to Bianca) Yes, Bianca?*

Bianca: *Is it alright if we have more than four decisions to list?*

Mrs. Binkley: *Absolutely, there are only four slots, but if you want to brainstorm more ideas, I think that would be excellent. That way you can choose your top one for the essay without forgetting about an important point.*

After speaking to Bianca and Leslie, I felt excitement with the idea that students actively worked beyond the requirements of the brainstorming guide in order to be successful in their essays. Bianca pulled me from my observations, and I began to interact one-on-one with students. As I made my way around the room, I gained insight into several of my students. Candace asked me whether or not an antagonist could be anything other than a person. Erica and Danielle, working together, discussed with me a definition for theme and how they could find it in their story. As I stepped back to look at these interactions, I decided that

this was a good time to encourage students to be creative through the writing process, since at this point many of them finished brainstorming and started their letters.

Mrs. Binkley: *Make up the date, create your own persona...be creative!*

Nathan: *Can we use any date?*

Mrs. Binkley: *Sure—if you want to make it year 1902 or 2020 that is fine.*

Nathan: *Alright! I think I'm going to make it year one!*

I realized how working one-on-one with students was a great way to answer individual questions that students might have. When I felt a student had a valid question that could be applied to the whole class, I provided that information to the whole group, as I did here.

The first inklings of student choice becoming a motivating factor took shape. Students appeared to have a positive attitude about the assignment and worked diligently, collaborating with one another. They wanted to work beyond the expectations of the assignment—something I did not expect so early in the year.

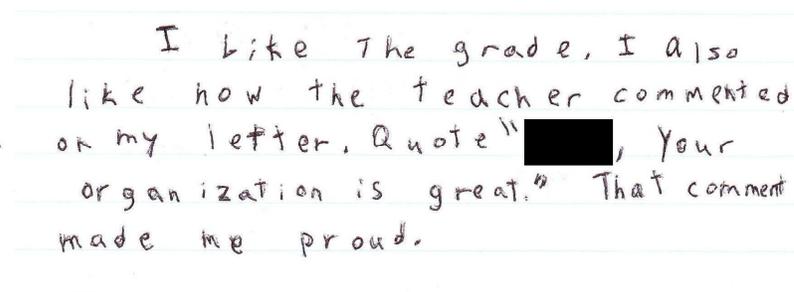
Students handed in their final drafts by the end of the week. After assessing students' writing with the rubric provided, I noted that several students struggled with developing ideas in their paragraphs or providing specific examples and details to back up their main points. I also noted some struggles with organization throughout the essays, and saw the need for students to be more

descriptive in their writing. As I handed back students' assignments for them to place in their writing folder, I overheard the following:

Patricia: *(look of astonishment) This is the best I've ever done in English!*

Candace: *Wow...whew...I feel so much better now!*

I wanted to gain a glimpse of student ability in writing reflections through this process as well, since such ability would be crucial later on in this study. After handing back the essays, I asked the students to write a short journal response, just a couple of sentences to a short paragraph, on how they felt they did on this essay, what they thought they could improve upon, or what they felt they accomplished through writing this essay. One reflection written by Ross (see Figure 4), resonated with me as I read over the students' responses:



I Like The grade, I also like how the teacher commented on my letter. Quote " [redacted], Your organization is great." That comment made me proud.

Figure 4. Ross's baseline writing assessment reflection.

As the bell rang for the class to end, I said, "Have a good day!" to my students and sat at my seat to reflect:

*...I am so happy to see that students are finding pride in their work. Who knew that such simple, positive feedback could instill such powerful motivation in students ...*

*...I'm glad to see students are happy they are doing well, but I am also cautiously doubting whether or not the grades on these baseline pieces will be perceived as now ...I don't need to do anything any more...I'm as good as I need to be ...getting students to understand that it's not the grade that truly reflects the progress necessary-there is always improvement that can be made ...how do I continue to motivate students to make those changes ...*

### **Creating Individual Goals: I Have a Choice?**

What is a goal?

*An achievement to work towards*

*Something that takes hard work*

*Takes several steps*

*An end in sight...*

As week three began, I asked my students to complete this statement as we embarked on generating our own individual goals for the writing process.

Students seemed familiar with creating goals and many expressed that they had created goals in classes before. Being familiar with the process, I felt that we were ready to jump right in. We discussed ways in which people decide what goals to work at and how to generate steps to achieve those goals; in other words, *what do I need to do in order to reach my goal at a specific time?* We discussed planning a time frame and making sure the goal is achievable. We also listed possible writing goals that could be established in this class.

The ball was now in the students' court. I handed out the goal sheets (see Appendix P) and off the students went, creating their own paths of learning for the next few months. I collected goal sheets at the end of the process to look at them before conferences. I wanted to get a feel for what students expected to achieve and accomplish this year. Compiling the goal sheets, I created the chart below (see Table 1), indicating what students wanted to achieve.

Table 1

*Students' Goals for the Writing Portfolio*

---

Goals Created	Number of Students
Spelling	9
Description	7
Get Interest in Writing Back	6
Better Grammar	5
Organization	5
Better Leads	3
Improve Vocabulary	2
Express Feelings	2
Sentence Structures	1

---

Students wanted to improve a little bit of everything and to me this was a great thing. I could concentrate on working with students to help improve the

core concepts of writing, such as description and organization, while still providing methods and strategies to help students work on their basic editing processes. I gained a renewed sense of understanding that students wanted to do the same things in their writing that I wanted to accomplish through generating writing portfolios in my classroom. We were all on the same page, and hopefully through this process, students could continue to stay as motivated to learn as they had already demonstrated.

***Conferences Round One: You Really Want to Talk to Me?***

Individual conferences were the core of instructional practice. Getting to meet individual needs through one-on-one feedback, modeling, and instruction gave me the opportunity to help students meet their writing goals. Over the next week, I took the time to meet with each student to discuss his or her goals, along with any specific needs in my classroom. Additionally, we discussed feelings on the course so far how and what additional strategies I could add to the classroom to help guide learning and increase student motivation. Students reviewed their goals and prepared short responses to the following three questions in their student journals:

- 1) Why did I create these goals?*
- 2) What will I need to help me achieve these goals?*
- 3) What concerns do I have about achieving these goals?*

When I went to plan my writing curriculum over the summer, I struggled with putting a time limit on these conferences. I realized after conducting my first few though, that each student has different needs and expectations for the conference process. Generally, conferences lasted about five minutes, but occasionally longer for those students who needed more time. While I met with individual students, the rest of the class completed activities designed around our reading unit for the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Students wrote journal entries or read silently or quietly in pairs. Developing a supportive classroom environment at the beginning of this study ensured that students quietly worked on their assignments while I met with others in conferences.

As we geared up to start conferences, I could tell students were a little uncertain about how the process worked. I verbally asked the class if they ever held conferences with their teachers before, and overwhelmingly, they said, “No.” I was dumbfounded and a little worried. *Would meeting with me intimidate my students? Would they be willing to talk openly in our conference?* Well, the questioning ended and the process began.

Isaac, Aaron, and Candace became representations for me as the three types of students in my class. Isaac, an out-spoken student, was always willing to tell me exactly what he felt, whether he said something positive or negative about it. He is what I would classify as a reluctant writer—one who does not particularly like the aspect of writing or other process tasks. He prefers taking

notes and tests. Although he often has creative flairs in class, he is a student who openly declares his preference to learn using the easiest route possible, with limited effort on his part. This became evident with his experience generating a writing territories list and collage earlier in the study.

During each conference session, I met with each student and took notes on our conversations, separating student and teacher dialogue and discussion from my own personal reflections. First, I met with Isaac (see Figure 5).

<u>Conference Notes/Comments:</u>	<u>Teacher Reflection/Thoughts:</u>
Isaac: "Writing is difficult and not fun. The only good thing about writing is being able to express your own opinions and ideas." "I sometimes struggle with starting an essay—often I get through that part I write okay, but it's not something I really like to do." "I really like the role playing and dramatic stuff we're doing in class. More of that would be great. The easier the work for me, the better."	Difficult = not fun The trick here is to get Isaac to do the hard work that is required of learning without him realizing it is hard work. This is a struggle with a lot of my writers. I now know that I will need to include a mini lesson that reviews some strategies students can use to create good leads, outline, and brainstorm. I am hoping the activities with the collage and territories will help. What Isaac describes as dramatic activities is what I as a teacher perceive as the hard work. This has me a bit puzzled. Perhaps the more active and creative he is, the more motivated he is as a learner.

*Figure 5.* Isaac's student and teacher conference notes on goals and writing.

Aaron struck a chord with me the first day of school when he mentioned to me that he thought my study was "cool." From that point, I knew I wanted to closely follow his journey as a growing writer through this story I told, seeing

how his opinion of what we experienced might change or alter as time progressed. As a learner, Aaron is a very outgoing student in class. He participates actively and is a strong leader in the classroom. Although his identity in the classroom is strong through his participation, as a writer, Aaron is what I would classify as the “lost student.” He completes work at a proficient level, meets deadlines, and does what he is asked, but that is usually where it ends. He encompasses a large portion of my classroom—students who have never been asked to work beyond general assignment guidelines or who play the role of “student” and never get sent in a direction to work beyond those expectations. Aaron and I met for his first conference (see Figure 6).

<u>Conferences Notes/Comments:</u>	<u>Teacher Reflection/Thoughts:</u>
<p>Aaron: “I like to write when I can make stuff up and write about something I want. When it becomes my own. All my teachers in seventh and eighth grade....(hesitation)”</p> <p>Mrs. Binkley: “Remember, I want you to be honest and I will not hold it against you in any way.”</p> <p>Aaron: “Well, they made us write about dumb stuff. Everyone always makes their assignment out to be a big deal and it’s not. I’m sick of working hard when it’s not really a big deal.”</p>	<p>Aaron really wanted to meet with me today. It was the end of the period and he even volunteered to stay beyond class to talk. Has he never gotten to vocalize his opinion to a teacher before? He is right. As teachers we sometimes make a big deal out of assignments when they are really not all they are cracked up to be. I am going to have to make creating a portfolio a worthwhile endeavor for Aaron. I do not want to fail him like he feels he has been failed in the past.</p>

*Figure 6.* Aaron’s student and teacher conference notes on goals and writing.

Candace entered my room with a unique situation from her peers. With an array of medical problems that most adults would not encounter in their lifetime,

Candace often had absences from class. To most people, being constantly sick would slow them down. For Candace, the exact opposite occurs. She is highly involved in after school activities and community endeavors. A go-getter, she is the type of student that every teacher wants, working towards perfection and striving hard to succeed. She recently began writing articles for a teen column in the local newspaper, solidifying her achievements in writing. I quickly identified Candace as a motivated, confident, and bright student in my classroom. She is what I wanted all my students to become. I hoped that I could continue to guide Candace to work hard and improve her writing ability from where it stood at this time. Candace and I sat down for her first conference to discuss her goals this year and how she felt about this class so far (see Figure 7).

<u>Conference Notes/Comments:</u>	<u>Teacher Reflections/Thoughts:</u>
<p>“I like writing because I get to express my feelings. I’m not a fan of actually handwriting assignments, so I prefer to type things.”</p> <p>“I feel like I didn’t try hard enough last year as a student, so I’m hoping to really work hard this year, even if they were high A’s.”</p> <p>“I don’t really like the revising or editing of a paper because I never know how to change my work to fit the right requirements or to make my paper better. I’m not very good at spelling and grammar.”</p> <p>“I like this class so far. I like the warm-ups and any other writing we do.”</p>	<p>Candace is an incredibly positive student. She seems like the type of student who is willing to try any type of new activity.</p> <p>She is clearly an academic student who works hard but always wants to do better.</p> <p>I wonder if she has ever been guided to do any better or because she is an A student, she is just kind of passed along, year after year, not really reaching beyond the expectations of an assignment to reach advanced status. I am really hoping that writing portfolios will give me a chance to work one-on-one with Candace to see how far she can go.</p>

*Figure 7.* Candace’s student and teacher conference notes on goals and writing.

After meeting with all of my students in conferences, I decided it would be important for me to compile some of the most salient quotes from students (see Figure 8) about what they liked and did not like about writing, and what strategies I could incorporate from the students' viewpoint in my classroom that might motivate them to learn.

<b>+ Writing</b>	<b>- Writing</b>	<b>Where Do I Go From Here?</b>
<p>I like putting pictures with my ideas.</p> <p>I get to express my feelings.</p> <p>I don't really know what I do like about writing, unless it's not assigned.</p> <p>I like when I have choice in my writing.</p>	<p>"I don't like writing—it's all been grammar since the fifth grade."</p> <p>My hand cramps...</p> <p>There are just TOO MANY restrictions.</p> <p>All my teachers in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade made us write about dumb stuff—made everything a big deal and it wasn't.</p> <p>It's difficult and it's not fun.</p> <p>When a teacher sets a certain idea—you have to come up with random stuff to fit the criteria. I have trouble filling the space.</p> <p>It's not one of my hobbies.</p> <p>Puts me to sleep...</p>	<p>I want people to think "Oh Wow! She knows what she's doing!"</p> <p>I need to add more adjectives to my writing.</p> <p>I like writing about sports. It would make me interested in the assignment.</p> <p>I struggle with starting the essay. When I get over that part, I think I write relatively well.</p> <p>I have trouble saying what's inside my head.</p> <p>I struggle with factual writing because then you have to look stuff up and stay 100% true.</p> <p>Writing about something I can relate to is good.</p> <p>I like being active, moving around.</p> <p>Good writers think it's easy.</p>

*Figure 8.* Salient quotes from goals conferences with students about writing.

Through compiling these insights, I realized that students need choice and creativity imbedded in their writing to enjoy it, ultimately motivating them to complete the assignment. I needed to infuse creativity and choice in assignments, such as research papers, to guide students to interest and motivation in these types of assignments. Further, students saw that practice in writing guides them to better writing, but their focus on that practice was mostly grammar. I needed to generate activities, such as mini lessons on ideas, organization, and sentence structure, to accompany grammatical lessons.

Astonishment took over me as I noted students think good writers think writing is easy. I would argue that most writers believe it is quite a difficult task and one that many can easily burn out on. Providing a model using my struggle with developing my ideas and organization, or other students' and expert writers' struggles, was another method I needed to infuse to show students that writing is a process—not something that happens over night or that is a piece of cake to complete, but something that takes time, patience, effort, and hard work, and in the end, can be very rewarding.

### **Why Do We Write?**

*Warm-up Today (on the projector): Make a list of all the situations where you write.*

*Bell rings.*

*Isaac: Does writing your name count?*

Quintin: *How about typing?*

Mrs. Binkley: *Of course. Any situation where words are formed through text is writing.*

Harold: *What about sign language?*

Mrs. Binkley: *Well, sign language is a visual speaking tool—perhaps if you write in Braille that would be more appropriate for the list.*

*(two minutes pass, attendance is taken by Mrs. Binkley, all students finish up their lists in their journals)*

Mrs. Binkley: *Okay, let's compile our ideas on the board (see Figure 9).*

*(writes down ideas as students share)*

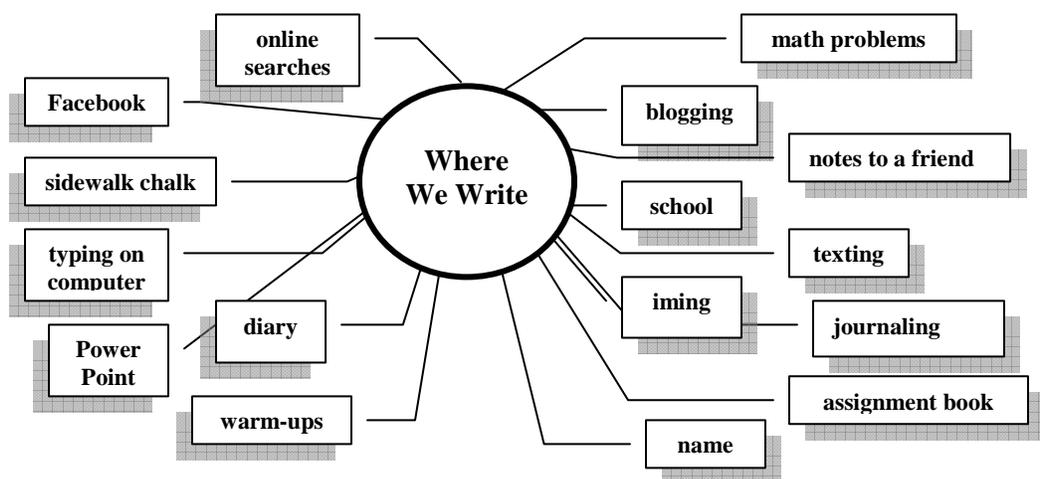


Figure 9. Web of students' ideas on where we write.

Mrs. Binkley: *Now, this is a great list. Let's think about this. We write quite a bit in our daily lives. Do you always use the same type of language for each of these situations?*

Isaac: *No. I won't talk the same when I'm on Facebook that I do at school.*

Mrs. Binkley: *I think most of us can agree with this (some students' heads nod).*

*This process is what is referred to as code-switching. Each time we write, we use a different set of rules. For instance, you would not use texting "talk" or the shorthand references you use to stand for specific words if you were writing a formal letter to apply for a job. So, what I would like you to think about now, taking these situations you write, what purpose do these particular situations serve? Let me give you an example. Say you are writing a letter to a friend. You could be writing a letter to persuade him or her, but your letter may serve other purposes. What are those purposes? Let's create another web (see Figure 10):*

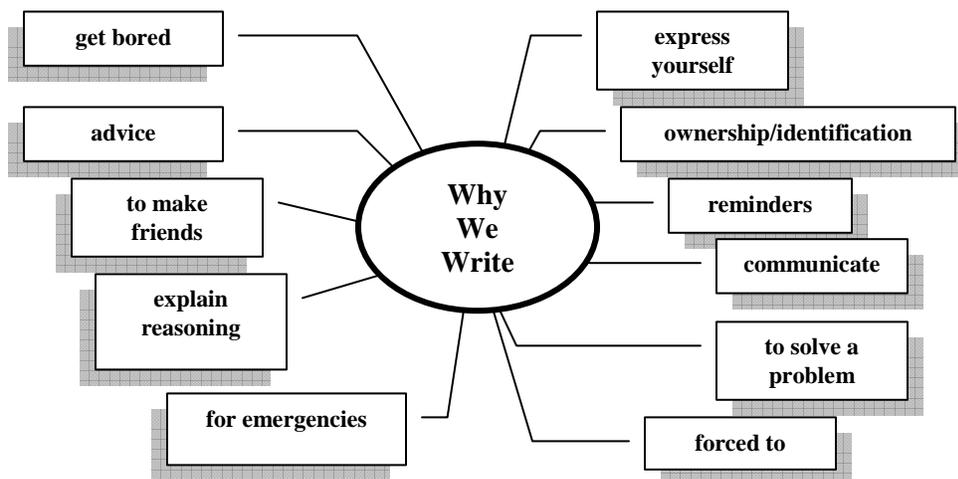


Figure 10. Web of students' ideas on why we write.

Mrs. Binkley: *Great! We have an excellent list here. Now, what I would like you to do is take these ideas and find an example of how a piece of writing could fit in to one of these categories. With your seat partner, grab a laptop and go to the*

*website abcnews.com. Find an article, read through it, and tell me in your journal what article you picked, what is the article's purpose, and find textual support from the article that backs up your reasoning. Go ahead and get your laptops and I will be around to help once you get signed on.*

*(students get laptops)*

*Isaac: Why is this taking forever!*

*Aaron: Text support. What's that?*

*Mrs. Binkley (explaining to the whole class): Aaron brings up a great question.*

*Text support is anything in the actual article that proves it is persuading or informing, or whatever other purpose the article has. Remember my texting and finding a job example?*

*Aaron: Oh, yeah...*

*Mrs. Binkley: The way the language is written can often show what type of writing it is—or what the purpose of the writing is.*

*(Suddenly, the bell rings. There is not enough time to share our results today).*

The next day, we started the period by sharing our results. Many students picked the article about Patrick Swayzee, who recently passed away. Students identified the article as a way to inform people of his death and others identified different articles on the same topic to commemorate his legacy. I was pleasantly surprised that students could easily see the difference between the two stories, even though they discussed the same topic.

Students now transferred this concept to their own writing territories and collage. I asked students to fill out the Why Do We Write? Handout (see Appendix Q) by going through the different reasons we write and placing topics from their writing territories and collage that fit under the reasons listed. I explained to my students that this was the first step to brainstorming ideas for the types of writing we would explore this year. I gave students some time to work, and assisted those students who had questions. Overall, the students grasped the concept and identified some ideas that would work great for writing each of the different modes. Students, ready with goals in mind and a plethora of brainstormed ideas, now prepared to embark on the first writing workshop unit.

### **Express and Reflect: All About Ideas**

Ah, to be 15 again. An age of free expression. Where anything goes, as long as everyone else is doing it. The first writing unit of instruction my students and I tackled was the express and reflect essay, or what I sometimes referred to as narrative writing. I felt this was a suitable unit to gain student interest in writing. I asked students to tell a story, express a thought or idea, or reflect upon an event in their lives. As I started this unit, I hoped students would embrace its purpose and structure. I soon found out that students demonstrated motivation to work, but not without some resistance.

As students busily picked up their writing folders from the counter bin, Candace joked about musical rehearsal the day before with me, and Jessica asked

about the mounds of work she needed to make up from her three days of absences. We were into October already, and our community formed a safe and supportive environment. Students felt comfortable holding conversations with me that not only pertained to class work, but also about our outside lives. They willingly took responsibility for their own work, ensuring that they spoke to me about missed assignments.

A free write began our writing for the day. I incorporated a variety of free write activities to provide students the opportunity to “sneeze write,” or write without barriers of grammar, organization, focus, or flow. I wanted students to get their ideas on paper as a first step in writing more in my classroom. I felt that completing these tasks would carry students away from the many restrictions that always held them back from enjoying writing, which they discussed in their pre-study surveys and conferences.

Because it was a time in my study when I finally felt familiar with the capabilities and workings of my students, I made the decision before beginning this unit to provide students some direction on the topic, especially for those students who often struggled with choice in the classroom. After explaining the purpose of the essay and how a free write session works, I presented students a list of topic starters on the whiteboard to use as jumping off points for their writing. I explained to students that they were not required to use these prompts, but they could start with these if they struggled with coming up with their own

ideas, did not feel motivated by any ideas on their writing territories or collage, or as a way to narrow down all of their brainstorm. I explained each prompt listed below, giving a personal example that I myself might choose to write about:

1. Something you hope to do.
2. Someone you care about.
3. Best experience in your life so far.
4. A cause you are passionate about.
5. Something that irritates you.
6. What life would be like without ...

After my explanation, we completed five short free writes, each lasting two minutes in length. To be honest, I felt quite hesitant about presenting this lesson to my students. I expected, *you want me to write non-stop for how long?* Instead, most students demonstrated on task behavior and willingly completed the activity.

As I began the first free write session, Isaac huffed under his breath, “I don’t know what to write about.” I do not know if he expected me to hear him, but I did, and as other students busily pushed pens and pencils to paper, I walked over and guided him to find something to begin his free write. We looked over his folder, connected ideas from his writing territories and collage to the topic starters listed on the board, and finally, a minute into the session, Isaac began to write. I extended the first session another minute because of Isaac’s hesitant start,

instructed students to put their writing utensils down, and asked for volunteers to share their ideas from their first free write topic to the rest of the class in hopes of generating other ideas for students and completing a quick check of their understanding of the task.

Harold: *“I wrote about life without arms!”*

Bianca: *“Life without mistakes...”*

Students expressed excitement to share their topics and by and large, the topics generated a buzz of interest from other students as many of them spoke of questions or comments, such as, “Wow, that is really unique.”

Our next four free writes flowed and followed the first one’s format. I even had to push a bit for a few students to stop their writing after the time was up because they became caught up in the moment. Writing without rules certainly motivated my students. After we completed the free write sessions, I split students up into small groups of about four students each, and asked each individual to pick one of his or her free writes to share. I asked group members to listen carefully to the free writes presented by their peers, noting one positive comment about each free write. As students began their conversations, I observed Kyle sharing his story about life without thumbs, noting that all his group members listened intently as he shared his free write. I turned to Quintin and Aaron in another group, discussing Aaron’s white water rafting story, as Quintin posed questions about the event because of a similar experience he had himself.

Erica expressed in another group her story about life without bees, as Danielle, startled, cried, “No! We need bees.” Her group began laughing all together.

Olivia spoke about life without death in her free write, as her group listened intently. Ross admitted to his group that he only completed two full free writes during the time, but that he felt happy with what he had written. I noted in my reflections that I was okay with this—*at least he completed the activity and if spending double time on one free write worked for him, then it worked for me.*

Students were on task, interested in their peers’ work—commenting, joking, and laughing. A true, supportive community became evident.

I asked the class to finish their discussions as the period ended. For homework that evening, I explained I wanted students to pick one of their free writes, whether it was the one they shared in their group or another of their choice, and develop it into a one-page, single-spaced essay. These drafts would become their first drafts of their express and reflect essays.

“Ugh...I have homework in every class,” Isaac whined.

“Well, at least you’re writing about something you’re interested in,” I responded.

“That’s true,” he stated. “This is the only homework I even feel like completing.”

The next day, even before the period began, Harold entered the room excitedly, sharing his topic idea with the first few students who walked in. To

warm-up, I asked students to share their rough drafts in small groups to provide one positive feedback comment and one critical comment or question about the text. After their discussions, students handed in their rough drafts. I received a copy from every student, on time. Spending the period on another unit's lesson plan, the period moved quickly, the bell rang, and I soon sat at my desk, reading over the rough drafts students presented. I found common problems: lack of organization, weak leads, underdeveloped ideas and description. I came across a couple of five-paragraph essays, as I shook my head as students tried to put a traditional, "So, in conclusion" at the end of an essay that told a story about a family vacation or a best friend. These issues showed similarities to the ones I took note of in their baseline writing pieces. I realized these would be aspects of writing instruction I would concentrate on in the next couple of weeks as students developed their essays.

### **Developing a Writing Workshop**

Teaching writing for me always occurred naturally in a writing workshop setting. This study on writing was no different. As students worked to develop their express and reflect essays, they drafted several copies, received instruction through whole class mini lessons on writing strategies, met in several peer reflection conferences, conducted one-on-one teacher conferences, and completed the editing process. Many of these activities overlapped within one another, as students worked at their own personal pace of learning and ability, with a

common deadline of a final draft at the end of the unit. It was necessary at many points for me to model how certain strategies worked, and how they best could guide students to a well-written essay. Each writing lesson described below took place in chronological order and usually lasted about one class period. The peer reflections, conferences, and revision discussions with students intertwined, as students worked individually at their own pace. Before beginning this writing unit, I reviewed the assessment criteria outlined in the rubric I generated (see Appendix R), so students understood the expectations of the assignment. From there, our daily writing workshop began.

### *Playing Teacher*

To dramatize the experience of my first mini lesson on developing ideas in my classroom and beginning the writing workshop, I completed a layered story, as students prepared their express and reflect essays for final submission, reflection, and inclusion in their writing portfolio, knitting my own experience in as I led students through this new, unexplored journey.

### *Mrs. Binkley*

Students experienced being the assessor instead of the “assessee” today and boy, did they enjoy it! After providing students with the six traits handout (see Appendix S) and some sample essays we would assess on ideas titled, “Lunch Table,” “An Important Object,” and “Mouse Alert,” I reviewed the grading criteria of the six traits, explaining the content and how to utilize the checklist’s

six-point scale. I spent most of the time on the ideas portion of the rubric, which we used to grade the sample essays based on the development of ideas. Our district is in the process of transitioning our “teaching language” for writing, so that all teachers use the cohesive criteria based on the six traits rubric. Then, students were off, armed with a checklist for ideas and the understanding of a six point grading scale. We read over the essays in the packet, discussed the myriad of problems in them, and even laughed at the silliness of some of the mistakes. Were all the issues we concentrated on ideas? Of course not. Students flocked to many of the other problems in the essays. It was a fun lesson, but more importantly, I believe students really understood the importance of sticking to criteria when grading and looking over an essay. At least maybe they saw some insight into what my job is like and will take some of that thinking to heart when they are peer conferencing later on in the writing process.

*Sarah*

Today we did this activity where we got to read over other students’ papers. I read a couple of the stories aloud. Some of the mistakes were terrible! I couldn’t believe what I had to read...especially the lines “killed or be killed” and “insurance” instead of “assurance.” It was hard for me to get through them without laughing myself. Don’t people know any better? I would never make those mistakes.

*Isaac*

That first essay about the lunch table we read today was horrible. I wanted to give it a one and half for ideas, but Mrs. Binkley explained that we can't give the essays half grades—we need to stick it in a category. I'm still not sure why. I'm sticking with my one and a half. The grammar was horrible.

*Kyle*

Seriously...how many times can an essay say "sometimes?" Clearly these essays are not from our school. There's no way people in ninth grade would write like this. At least I don't.

*Mrs. Binkley*

Students felt relief to know these essays were from another source, not our school. I am happy these stories are from somewhere else...although I feel like the common mistakes in these essays are the ones I continue to see in my students' work today. Hopefully, pointing out the problems in other pieces of writing will help students see how silly the mistakes are and how easily the mistakes can be avoided.

*Quintin*

Wow...the first couple of essays we read were bad. I asked Mrs. Binkley while we graded the second essay if she ever got an essay from a student she couldn't grade because it was so bad. She said she usually lets the students redo it if it

isn't great. I wish all teachers would let you redo your work. Sometimes my ideas just don't get on the paper right the first time.

*Mrs. Binkley*

I was happy to see that students knew the essays "Lunch Table" and "An Important Object" lacked in ideas, along with quite a few other aspects in writing. They certainly have a good sense what is not correct in someone else's paper. I hope they can transfer the same grading criteria to their own work without getting jaded by the "grade."

*Isaac*

The writer of "Mouse Alert" is a total overachiever. Look how much she wrote! I totally gave it a six because it's long and detailed. I can't write like that. I get bored when I write. I don't know how to write like that. *I wish I could write like that.*

*Sarah*

Ugh... Kyle was being such a pain. I wanted to give the "Mouse Alert" a four and a half, but he kept arguing that I couldn't. If I want to, I will. I think I write better than that.

*Quintin*

After we read the stories, Mrs. Binkley asked us to rate our own and explain why we gave it that grade. Lame... I mean, I like Mrs. Binkley and all, but seriously, I

don't get why we have to do things like this sometimes. Why can't she just give me an A and be done with it.

*Mrs. Binkley*

I just do not understand. Students showed engagement in this lesson the whole period up until we transferred the assessment process to their own work. Did I scare them off? Maybe because they realized they were not as good as they thought they were. Maybe it was a hit to the self-esteem of each of my students that I was not expecting. It is tough to see your own work through an assessment lens. I hate doing it myself. It is hard work. I will need to continue to motivate my students to work hard if reflection is going to be an integral part of our learning. It certainly is the core purpose of portfolios. Without it, completing the final portfolio is not going to seem beneficial to students or to me.

*Isaac*

I gave myself a five. I wrote on my reflection that I think that my paper deserves a five because it is interesting and the message is clear. It is great! Maybe I don't deserve a five, but maybe if I give myself a five, Mrs. Binkley will think I deserve it.

*Aaron*

I gave myself a three. I didn't organize one thing at all. I wish that I would have had more stuff in my paper.

*Candace*

I was absent the past few days. Erica told me we read these essays and graded them. She said some of the things they read were funny. I hate coming back after being absent. I feel so out of it. I hope I don't get behind.

*Mrs. Binkley*

Candace finally returned. I began to worry that she was going to get behind in this unit and she would be left catching up on many of our class activities outside of class, leaving my observations on her progress vacant. While in writing workshop today, she came to talk to me about her essay. She showed me her rough draft and asked for advice on where to go next. We spent some time reviewing the ideas checklist and examining her rough draft and where it might fall. Both of us agreed that she was at about a three for ideas. We conferenced briefly and informally about how she should tell a story more than an overview of the history of music—her essay was almost too informative.

*Candace*

I totally didn't realize I was writing an informative essay. Unbelievable! All this work. At least Mrs. Binkley told me I could use this essay for the next essay we're writing. I think I might change my topic. I'm going to need to do some more brainstorming. I want to do my best.

*Mrs. Binkley*

After meeting with Candace, I talked with Erica a bit. She came up to me, frustrated, not sure where to go next. I read over her rough draft again, noting her topic of her sister, who she considers as her best friend. She jumped from story to story, not really developing a clear focus on what she wanted to express about her sister. I suggested Erica pick the most important story about her sister and use that story as the foundation of her essay. She struggled with this suggestion, stating all her stories were important. I told her for the purpose of this essay, she needed to concentrate on just one. Needless to say, her eye roll and huffs back to her computer indicated she was not happy about the changes I suggested.

Revision is a new concept for my students. I must not be afraid of some resistance. *I am afraid of my students shutting down.*

*Erica*

Ugh...my essay is fine. All of these stories are important. She's my best friend. There's no way I can fill the whole page by telling just one of these stories. Why can't I just turn in this essay the way it is. It was never a problem before.

*Isaac*

After sitting at my computer, staring at my screen for a bit not knowing what to do, I decided to ask Mrs. Binkley what I needed to change with my essay because right now I think it's so good and there's nothing to change. She told me I need to work on organizing my ideas. I think it's fine just the way it is.

*Mrs. Binkley*

Isaac is such a hard student to read. Sometimes he is motivated, sometimes he is not. He is not a bad writer at all when he tries. He is motivated when there is structure with a little choice, but when I let him go to work on his own, he seems stranded. Too much choice is too much for Isaac. I am hoping he does not drown in this process. I am going to need to continue to work with him independently, perhaps even more often than one scheduled conference per writing assessment to ensure he is doing all right.

*Isaac*

Mrs. Binkley suggested I look over Ross's paper to see how he organized his story. While reading, I thought, "Wow...that's really cool." I think I might set mine up like an interview like his. Maybe this won't be so bad.

*Quintin*

I sit next to Mrs. Binkley's desk. I listened to every conversation she's had with students today. My writing stinks. I didn't write one topic—I talked about my entire hockey tournament. I don't want to start over. I'm not going to start over.

*Crumple.* I might as well just fail.

*Mrs. Binkley*

Oh no! Quintin went to crumple up his paper towards the end of class today and I tried to stop him. He claimed he was going to fail. I told him he could use what he already wrote and that he needed to just make some revisions. He was just so

frustrated. Am I pushing students too far too fast? I am only asking them to revise their work! I expected some resistance, but I am getting quite a bit more here than I anticipated.

*Isaac*

I am disappointed we're not going to work on these essays tomorrow. My ideas are finally all right here, up in my head. I could just sit here and finally write this thing.

*Mrs. Binkley*

Isaac was really into the writing process after our conference. I did not see much hesitation from Erica either after she finally sat down and got working. Perhaps the resistance was just a way to say, "Work, you're making me work?" Maybe they have never been asked to do this, or when they have, they got away with not making revisions anyway. *I am not going to settle.*

***Leading the Way***

As writing workshop progressed, I became set and determined to motivate my students to revise their work. I continually examined their drafts and noticed some problems with their leads. Every year I get the same clichéd lead from students—the dreaded question. *Have you ever gone kayaking? Well, I did, and it was a lot of fun.* Whoever told my students that this would hook a reader? It was time to end it, here and now. At the beginning of the period, I asked five students to go to my bookcase in the reading corner and pick a book of their

choice. I asked each student to read over the first few lines of the book with their seat partner and decide what was catchy about it, what they did not like, and reasons why. After a few minutes of individual discussion, we shared our leads and thoughts. Overall, students noted the variety of techniques authors use at the beginning of a text as similar to what a writer could use at the beginning of an essay: a descriptive story, a quote, dialogue, suspense, and so forth.

I asked students to go back into their essays and revise their leads for homework that evening, rewriting them if necessary. Before leaving the period, Kyle asked if he could still use the question he had as his lead in his introduction, as long as he started with something else. I told him that such a technique would be fine, as long as he provided information before the question that connected the question to the actual essay. From our discussion and mini lesson, Kyle took his question and created the following effective lead (see Figure 11):

A lot of everyday conveniences seem impossible to live without. Run-of-the-mill things like cars, computers, television, and cell phones are a privilege to us all. A large number of advances have put us in the position with which hard tasks have become easier to do. Because of this, we as a society have to do less work to accomplish hard tasks. But a lot of us still think of the small stuff. So, what would it be like if the human race went without the only suitable protection for our feet, the shoe?

*Figure 11.* A lead created by Kyle for his express and reflect essay through the lead mini lesson.

### *An Equation for Descriptive Writing*

*proper nouns + vivid adjectives + action verbs = descriptive writing*

Math in English...not something I ever expected to use, but writing out the equation like this for students, it seemed a few light bulbs went on as to how to write descriptively. “Free Write Friday” arrived, as Quintin coined it. I explained to my students they needed to add more description to their sentences and this equation on how to go about doing it would guide them. Yes, there may be better strategies to utilize to add description in an essay, but we needed to start somewhere, and this seemed appropriate.

I presented students with a set of warm-up directions that followed a systematic procedure to revise their work:

1. Write six common nouns in your journal.
2. Change those common nouns into proper nouns.
3. Write a unique adjective next to each of your nouns. Be creative!
4. Create action verbs for each of your nouns to complete (not walk, but gallop).
5. Write a paragraph using your descriptive chart.

As our quiet free write came to a close, Isaac called me over, saying, “Come read mine, Mrs. Binkley. It’s really funny!” He demonstrated motivation in this assignment, and I observed that giving him this equation meaningfully engaged him in learning, as well as other students.

Danielle, Erica, and Candace also raised their hands to have me read over their work. Many students demonstrated that they wanted me to see the creativity and the interest they had in this activity. At this point, I found it beneficial for several students to share their descriptive paragraphs and many did so willingly.

George shared his free write first (see Figure 12), as many other students followed.

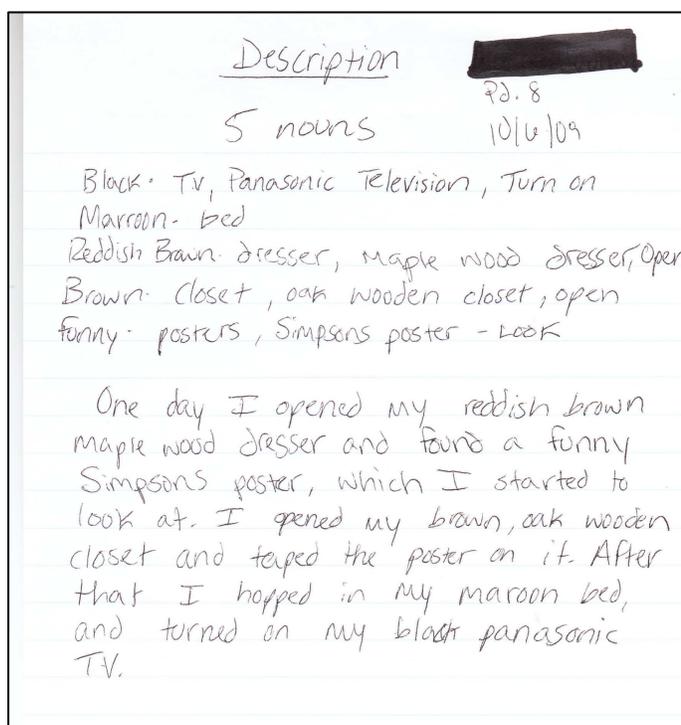


Figure 12. George's paragraph written during the description mini lesson.

Laughter, comments, and conversation about each other's nouns, adjectives, and verbs could be heard as students assembled their paragraphs and shared them to the class.

As we wrapped up, Isaac repeated, “That was a cool activity! We should do more like that!”

Harold agreed saying, “Yeah, that was just like mad libs.”

Harold and Isaac reinforced once again for me that learning can be fun for students. Reading over the descriptions students wrote, such as George’s, I noticed that students demonstrated the capability of adding vivid description to their writing when equipped with the right strategies. With this in mind, we continued our day working on our rough drafts, making revisions, and typing the essays on laptops. I encouraged students to transfer descriptive adjectives, nouns, and verbs into their essays as they continued to make revisions.

As I sat to reflect on the day’s event, I wrote:

*Isaac’s motivation was through the roof for this assignment! What a contrast from the previous ones. I think I have found the balance of student choice and structure in this warm-up. I gave him a specific path to follow, but he came up with the ideas—this is the balance I need to bring to the entire writing study...*

### ***Peer Reflections***

Writing workshop in my classroom progressed, and it was now time for students to take their assessment skills into the process of looking at other students’ work. I reviewed with students the peer conference reflection sheet (see Appendix T). I made a point not to refer to this worksheet as a peer-editing sheet, because I did not want students to be editors—I wanted them to give feedback,

meaningful feedback, to each other about their essays. I stressed heavily that this process should be different from the editing they may have completed in the past. I explained that students should use the completed peer reflection sheets as a way to understand what their audience experiences while reading the essay, and to fill in any of the missing pieces necessary to make the essay more interesting, unique, telling, and readable. From there, I explained to students that they should, at some point in the writing workshop, have two students read over their essay, discuss the reflection starters together and any critical feedback from the essay, and have those two students fill out the peer conference reflection sheet. I encouraged students to use the handout as a discussion guide to lead their peer conference discussions. I walked students through this process by modeling it with Olivia and answered any questions. Students used the remaining time in the class period to begin peer conferences and finished them throughout the remaining days in our writing workshop.

As students began, I observed one particular peer conference that took place between Leslie and Aaron. Leslie quietly read over Aaron's essay, offered some verbal feedback, as Aaron acknowledged her thoughts. Leslie pointed out some sentences that did not make sense to her as she read them, and both continued to discuss their fascination with Aaron's topic choice, life without television. Leslie submitted a reflection sheet (see Figure 13) to Aaron so that he could reference her comments while making revisions to his essay. Leslie's

reflection demonstrates her ability to offer positive feedback to Aaron to encourage him to continue to make changes in his writing to reach his target audience.

**PEER CONFERENCE REFLECTION SHEET**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ I am reviewing the portfolio of: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: 10/23/09 The portfolio piece I am reviewing is called: Life w/out writing.

Example peer response starters:  
*Remember to be positive in your response*

- I like...
- You have shown that you understand ...
- Something that captured my attention ...
- I want to know more about ...
- Key words for me were ...
- I particularly valued ...
- A question raised in my mind is ...
- An idea that sparked for me was ...
- Something I identify with is ...
- What I found especially meaningful was ...
- Something you wrote that pushed my own thinking was ...
- I learned that you ...
- Thank you for reminding me how important it is to ...

PLEASE WRITE RESPONSE BELOW

14  
 - I like how you included multiple ways writing is in your life. Explain in greater detail how life would be if you couldn't write. you have good sentence structure, but maybe add some variety of sentences. Good job!

*Adapted from Rolheiser, Bower, and Stevahn (2000)*

Figure 13. Leslie's peer reflection sheet in response to Aaron's express and reflect essay.

Because of Leslie's familiarity of the essay's requirements, she critically analyzed the aspects that Aaron could work on in order to ensure he met all the rubric's criteria. After receiving the reflection sheet, Aaron continued to work on improving these aspects the rest of the period. He occasionally came back to my desk in between the conferences I held that day with other students to ask questions or to clarify if he made improvements to his writing. This collaborative approach successfully motivated Aaron to make improvements in his writing.

### ***Conferences Round Two: Let the Students Do the Talking***

During our writing workshop, I continued to meet informally with students as they needed assistance in their writing. I also scheduled a student and teacher conference meeting with each student to make sure I addressed all of the students in my classroom. I wanted to continue to motivate students to drive the conference, focusing the attention on what the students thought they needed to work on, taking control of their learning and writing instruction. I provided students with three leading questions to jumpstart the conference, which I asked them to answer before they came to the meeting. The questions were:

1. *What is the best part of this piece so far?*
2. *What do you feel you still need to work on?*
3. *How can I better help you to meet your writing goals?*

I again highlighted Isaac, Aaron, and Candace through this conferencing process, noting their progress through the writing workshop as they formulated essays to incorporate into their writing portfolios. I first met with Isaac (see Figure 14), as I worked at convincing him that there were still changes possible to his essay, despite his reluctance to make any changes.

I then held a conference with Aaron (see Figure 15). We discussed more about the assignment requirements than we did his actual essay. Because of Aaron's recent absences, it was necessary for us to discuss what he still needed to complete. Conferences in this sense provided yet another opportunity for me to

meet the individual needs of each of my students as they arrived. If assignment requirements were the need of the student, then that is what we discussed first.

<u>Conference Notes/Comments:</u>	<u>Teacher Reflections/Thoughts:</u>
<p>Isaac: "I think the introduction is the best because it is attention grabbing and it's got good questions about what the essay will be about."            "I think I need to work on the conclusion. I could use your help there."            Mrs. Binkley: "Let's take a look at what you've got so far. Remember, it does not need to be like a five paragraph essay."            Isaac: "Okay, so does my set-up work?"            Mrs. Binkley: "Absolutely."</p>	<p>It took a bit to motivate Isaac to want to look over his essay. He was convinced it was the best it could have been. Maybe he just does not know what to look for. Revision is a skill that is learned—not acquired.            I used a strategy during this conference that seem to really work for Isaac and many of my other students. We noted the main ideas he mentioned in his intro. on a separate sheet of paper and then took all the ideas that fell into each of those topics underneath. Then, he was off to reorganize his paper. Seems simple, but students do not know how to work from an outline!</p>
<p>We look through his introduction and conclusion paragraph—complete concluding paragraph—complete an organizational mini lesson.</p>	

*Figure 14.* Isaac's student and teacher conference notes on the express and reflect essay.

<u>Conference Notes/Comments:</u>	<u>Teacher Reflection/Thoughts:</u>
<p>Aaron and I discuss his format and organization for an expressive form. "Wow...that would be really cool."            Aaron did not have his conference questions with him today because he forgot his journal at home- he had been absent for awhile.</p>	<p>Working on organization with Aaron really strengthened his essay. I cannot wait to see the final result. These student absences are really catching up to my instruction! I feel like I am spending so much time re-explaining when I need to be providing new instruction!</p>

*Figure 15.* Aaron's student and teacher conference notes on the express and reflect essay.

Absences became a frequent problem in my small class, and organizing a scheduled conference with each student to meet his or her needs became quite difficult. I barreled on, and finally held a conference with Candace towards the end of the writing unit (see Figure 16).

<u>Conference Notes/Comments:</u>	<u>Teacher Reflections/Thoughts:</u>
Candace: "Well, the best part of this piece so far to myself is the way I put it into the perspective of a teenage girl who has to make decisions for herself."	Candace is so grammar driven!
"I believe I need to add more about how a day in her life goes."	I think because she is a strong writer, and because her feedback has always been about her grammar, she finds no reason to change or revise anything else. I need to continually work with her to generate positive feedback on her writing, and work one-on-one like we did today to address the other issues she has. We will edit in our grammar unit—it will come together then!
Mrs. Binkley: "I think that's a great idea. That way we get the whole picture of who your character really is."	
Candace: "I think you could help me by going through and telling me if anything is grammatically incorrect because I think a lot of it is."	
Mrs. Binkley: "Well, let's first start by taking a look at the bulk of your essay. The editing will come once your ideas and structure are all done. Let's talk about sentence structure."	

*Figure 16.* Candace's student and teacher conference notes on the express and reflect essay.

Throughout the conference meetings, I observed students being polite and respectful to other students, such as Nathan, who came to my desk while I met with another student and said, "Excuse me, sorry to interrupt, but do you mind if I ask a quick question?" I listened intently as Candace and Theresa discussed each other's feedback in conferences and how they might revise their essays. Even

without a scheduled conference, students willingly came to me for feedback and advice. I began to see Isaac take control of his learning as he continually asked for feedback on how to revise his essay from both myself and other students. He openly came to my desk and admitted he struggled with how to develop the interview questions in his essay—quite a different outlook on the writing process from our first encounters with the free writes. We sat and worked through the revisions together. A transition occurred—from resistance to willing assistance.

***Finally, I Can Hand This Thing In!***

Submission time came for the final drafts. I felt reluctant to end this process because I was not sure if I had truly met all my students' needs for them to write the best final draft they possibly could. It was not until I completed my study and reflected on all that we accomplished that I realized I could only do so much in the first few months of school, and that as writing instruction continued for my students, new realizations about their learning and experiences would develop for them.

Students gathered their drafts and peer reflections sheets, stapled them together, and placed them on my desk. As I looked at Quintin gathering his materials, a smile swept my face as he handed in his final draft on time, even after the earlier episode where he crumpled up his first draft.

“How do you feel now that you've completed it and finished all the changes?” I asked him.

“I just had to start over,” he responded.

“Sometimes that’s just what we need to do.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t so bad,” Quintin said.

Yeah, I guess it was not so bad. We arrived at the end of our first unit and I felt a sense of relief as well. Even with all the resistance at the beginning of the revision process, the work to motivate students to begin to assert independence in completing tasks and asking for help, and introducing them to new concepts of conferences and reflections, I realized we accomplished so much in such a short amount of time.

Over the next week, I sat, grading the students’ final drafts and reviewing the changes they completed. I noted that students developed their essays, made the changes I suggested, and demonstrated success in generating a polished final draft. I struggled with finding the right words to express my excitement in my written reflections, as I noted my enthusiasm with my students’ ability to transfer our conference discussions to their written draft. There was still much work to be done though, as we began the reflection process.

***Reflection: “You’ve Run Out of Things for Us To Do”***

Students practiced the reflection process with the baseline piece before. It was now time to provide a platform and framework for the purpose of reflection for the final portfolio. I handed out the individual reflection sheet, reviewing the directions with my students.

“We’re writing something about our writing...whoa...,” Frank responded.

He was right. This was an act of metacognitive thought, something my students displayed difficulty with in finding purpose and meaning, and sometimes ability to complete. Since the worksheet provided a variety of sentence starters to begin reflection, I modeled some of the sentences for students on the whiteboard to give them an idea of what to write. I also compared the process to the act of filling out the reflection sheet during peer conferences, noting the similarities in types of comments generated. After the explanation, I sent students to complete a reflection on the express and reflect essay and one other piece of writing to include in their writing portfolio.

Students began writing diligently, filling out their reflections, and then attaching them to their writing. After Isaac completed his first reflection, he sat, with a confused look on his face, raising his hand and announcing, “I don’t know what to write. Can you just tell me what to do?”

Isaac was doing so well with this process that I was a little confused myself with why he struggled with what to me seemed a simple task, especially since I provided several examples of how to use the sentence starters to complete the reflection and modeled the process. I re-explained the reflection process, offered some additional modeling of the sentence starters, and discussed how he could use the critical feedback I provided him on the rubric to guide his reflection. From there, he quickly wrote his reflection on the express and reflect essay (see

Figure 17) and another one on an additional piece as well. I sat back down at my notes and jotted down in my reflections that students, such as Isaac, not equipped to always make decisions with a wide variety of choices, need a narrower structure to respond effectively. Isaac was still building his confidence in being able to work independently and make conscious choices for his learning. Choice is worthwhile to incorporate in the classroom, but within the means that allow each student to flourish in his or her learning.

**INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION SHEET**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ The portfolio piece I am reviewing is called: NO + ✓

**Reflection starters**

- This was meaningful to me because ...
- This piece demonstrates my understanding of ...
- I am proud of this piece because ...
- I am not satisfied with this piece because ...
- Something I would like others to notice about this piece ...
- A question I want to pursue as a result of this piece ...
- This piece demonstrates a challenge for me because ...
- I have gained insight as a result of this entry because ...
- I would like to pursue additional learning in this area because ...

**REFLECTION:** I was very proud of myself because I got an amazing grade. I think that this was my best essay that I ever wrote. I was proud because I started off to be very bad and I worked hard and made it very good.

*Teacher Comments/Response:*

These are great accomplishments!  
Working hard does pay off. Precision certainly helped you to accomplish the grade you received.

*Adapted from Rolheiser, Bower, and Stevahn (2000)*

Figure 17. Isaac's individual reflection sheet for the express and reflect essay.

From Isaac's reflection, I noted his pride and realization that all of his hard work paid off in his final draft. Although I think he could have been more

explicit in describing why it was the best essay he ever wrote, after his reluctance to begin the process, it was a start.

As students continued to write reflections, Quintin asked how many points the reflections were worth. I explained to him they were all part of the final writing portfolio, and that he would receive credit for them there. I also stressed to him it was not about the points, but really about him making realizations about his learning, what makes him a better writer, and what he needs to work on in the future to meet his writing goals.

“Mrs. Binkley, You’ve run out of things for us to do,” he announced. *Had I run out of things to do? Was I wasting my students’ time?* As the period ended and I sat to reflect at my desk, I thought about how I could continue to motivate students to reflect about their own thinking:

*Reflection is a difficult step to sell to these students. I need to continue to add reflective questions throughout my lessons to motivate my students to think of reflection as a critical step to meaningful learning. Maybe I should point out all the times students complete reflection already and we should discuss how those activities help them learn. I know they are reflecting all the time and they don’t even realize it! Maybe I should talk about what reflection occurs outside of the classroom. Perhaps the more students realize they already complete reflection regularly, the less likely they are to think of it is a waste of time and energy in this class. I think I will try it.*

### **Mid-Study Survey: Where Are We Now?**

The middle of the road. A turning point. I wanted to find out what my students thought about our learning processes so far before we started the next essay. I presented students a mid-study survey, asking them specifically about the processes encountered so far—writing workshop, conferences, and reflection. I wanted to see students' responses to these processes, along with what other aspects of writing instruction I should consider providing, to motivate and generate meaningful learning experiences for my students. I completed a pastiche (see Figure 18), identifying the most important aspects of the writing process and portfolios so far, analyzing and connecting students' insights in order for me to realize what I still needed to address and complete as our next writing unit began.

As I reviewed the results, I noted the positive impact meeting with students individually in conferences had on student writing. They felt that individual attention improved their writing. Reviews were split on the peer conferences and I understood why. Most students still saw the process as a way to give feedback on the mechanics of the essay, not on how they essay read. Although Leslie and Aaron's peer conference observation showed the process as a success, it still needed clarification for other students. I realized that since the process took place with little input from me, and they did not view their peers as experts, they did not understand the value their peers had in commenting on their writing. I decided I needed to continue to implement modeling of this process for

students and stress the purposes of peer reflection—it was not for changing writing, but a way to provide feedback on how the writing reads to an audience.

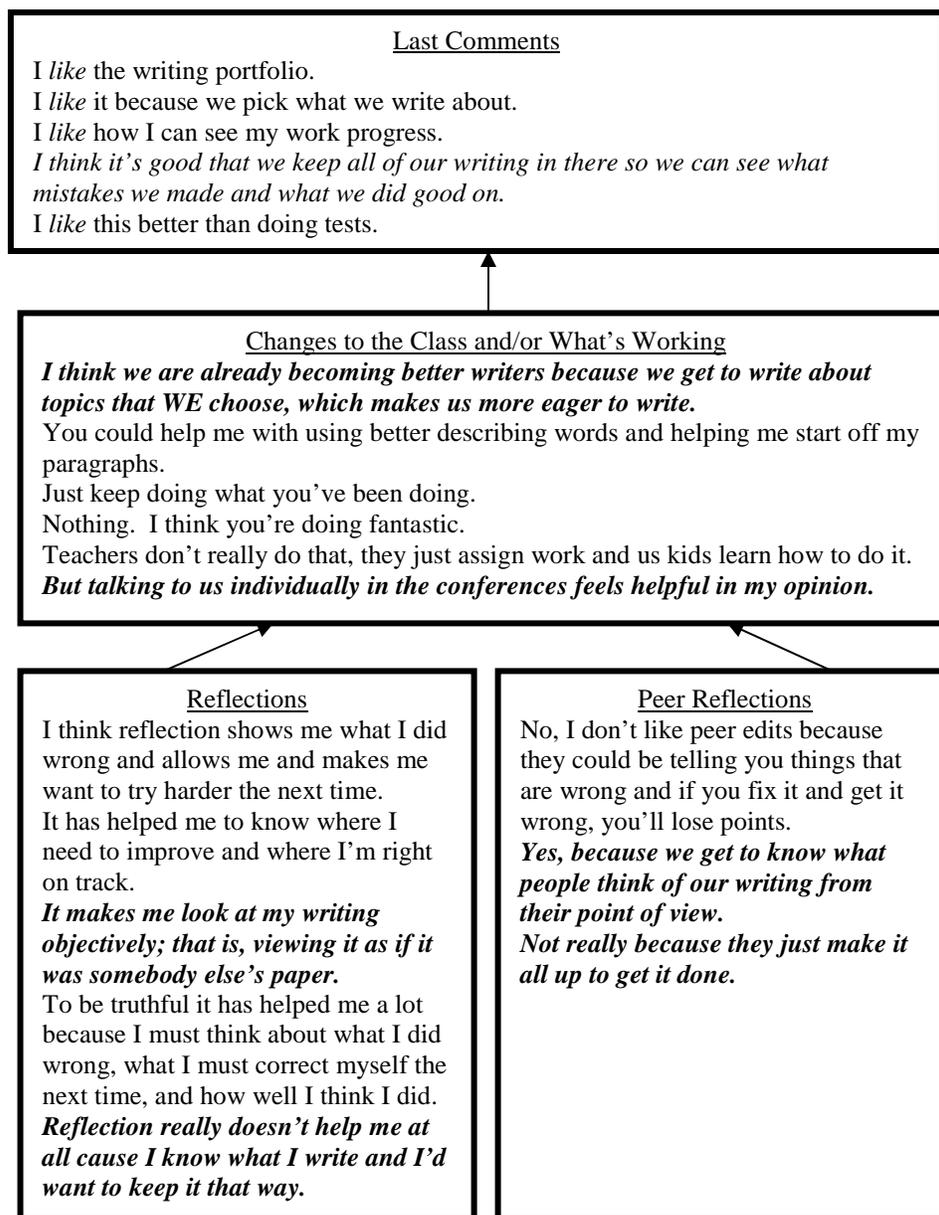


Figure 18. Pastiche of mid-study survey results.

Students expressed positive comments about how class ran and the writing portfolios. They found purpose and motivation in the mini lessons and conferences. Besides, this was better than tests!

### **Inform and Explain: Let's Research**

Because of students' familiarity with the format of a writing workshop, it did not take long for us to jump right into the next unit. For this writing assessment, students picked an informative topic or explained an event or process. We continued to hold student and teacher conferences, completed peer reflections, revised rough drafts several times, and worked through writing mini lessons. Our time on this unit moved quickly because both students and I came equipped with a clear understanding of what to expect.

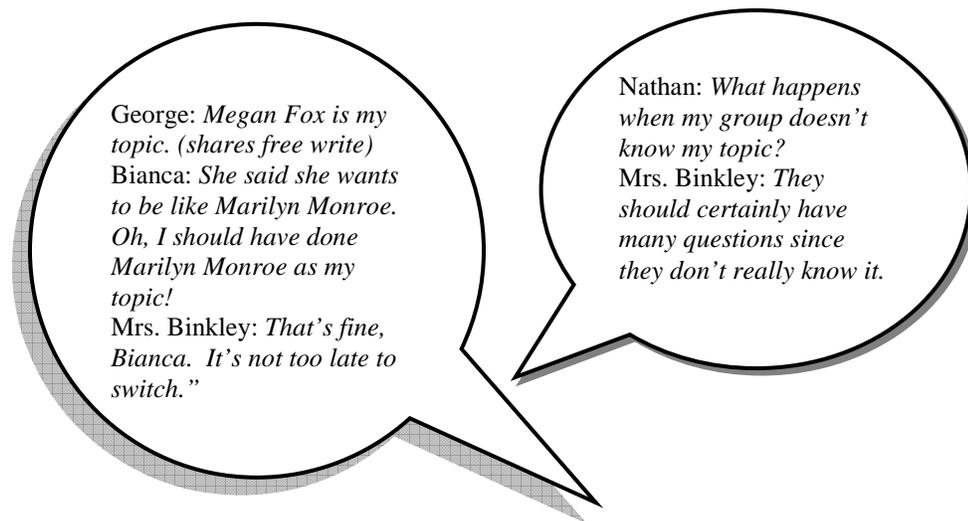
"This means we have to write," Erica said, as she entered the room and read the directions to pick up writing portfolios on the projector. The period began by students getting out their individual worksheets where they identified topics from their writing territories and collage that could possibly fit into each type of writing structure. I pointed out our next essay would be to inform and explain, identified the purpose of the writing assignment, and modeled the brainstorming process using my own personal examples. For instance, I explained that my favorite candy is skittles, so I could, for example, write an informative essay on the history of the flavors of skittles. From there, I generated

my own free write as students asked questions about the writing process and my topic.

My example resonated well with Olivia, as she exclaimed, “This one is going to be good.” I sent students to start brainstorming a list of topics, bouncing ideas off their seat partners. As with the last essay, we completed a series of free write sessions, two minutes in length, where students took their brainstormed ideas and wrote without interruption about their topics.

“I have the best topic ever,” Ross told his seat partner, as we concluded the last of the free writes. In my reflections, I wrote that although Ross was not able to complete all the free writes in our last essay, the process motivated him to identify and explore topics that he enjoyed for his writing assignments.

After brainstorming, I asked students to get into assigned small groups to share two of the free writes they completed to help decide which one they might consider developing into their essay. Group members shared their free writes without interruption from group members. They posed a question they developed about their topics—something that seemed left out, something confusing, and so forth. I asked each group member sharing his or her free write to write down the questions posed in his or her journal. I explained to students that these questions would be great starting points to help elaborate their ideas and conduct any necessary research for their chosen topic. Students began to collaborate, and I highlighted the notes I was able to take while students discussed (see Figure 19).



*Figure 19.* Observational notes from students' collaborative discussions on their inform and explain brainstorm free writes.

At the end of the period I wrote in my reflections:

*I am glad to see that students are willing to take chances and share with the rest of the group to gain critical feedback. I think students are finally getting the purpose of peer feedback. It is not supposed to be instructional feedback of strategies to improve their writing, but suggestions on how to make it more readable. I am glad these students are at least portraying a model for successful risk-taking.*

Before students began to draft their essays, I reviewed the assessment criteria on the inform and explain rubric (see Appendix U). Writing workshop then began with informal meetings with students and drafting. I worked with Aaron individually to develop his ideas, modeling outlining strategies to organize

his thoughts. George and I met to discuss the credibility of his sources. Kyle and Sarah both discussed with me questions about their topics and ways to clarify their ideas. Ross presented what he identified as a “rough, rough” copy to me for feedback on his ideas. All these conversations were student driven, student initiated.

I overheard Leslie and Bianca sharing ideas from their essays, and Leslie telling Bianca she wrote her essay on the rapper Eminem last night at home because she wanted to get a head start. Bianca commented she should use song lyrics to begin her essay. Erica and Candace read aloud sections of their texts to each other, asking for feedback. Students shared their writing and conferenced without instruction to do so, stayed on task, and initiated meaningful feedback to each other. Before I knew it, my teaching dream came true right before my eyes.

### ***What is My Name?***

As students worked at generating rough drafts for their essays, I presented a short mini lesson on finding credible resources if they needed to complete research for their essay. I decided to utilize a topic for students that provided a balance of structure and choice—researching the origin of their names. I allowed students to pick their first or last name, depending on which they preferred. I explained to students the criteria resources should have in order to be considered credible, and the importance of having such resources if researching. Since the primary source of information for students was the Internet, I decided to work

directly with that resource. Students searched for three resources about the origins of their names and then generated a short paragraph about their findings. I then asked students to answer a few short reflection questions about the process to see the impact of the mini lesson.

As students worked, I moved around the room to assist them in finding resources and creating their paragraphs. I overheard Frank telling his seat partner “This is fun,” as I worked with Nathan, explaining why we needed to find three resources.

“Because we need to verify what we find is correct—finding more than one site assures we can back up our facts in our essays—can’t just rely on one source,” I responded.

He seemed satisfied with my explanation and continued to look for additional sources. Making clear the purpose of this lesson became critical for my students, and I understood why—*why would you want to complete work without a purpose?* As the period ended, students responded to the following reflective questions:

1. *What have I learned about looking for credible resources? Why is it important to find resources that can be held accountable for accuracy of facts?*
2. *What is the hardest thing about finding credible resources? What is the easiest part? Why?*

After reading through students' responses, I realized students saw the value in finding credible sources to make sure their information was correct and valid. Overwhelmingly, the hardest part for students was finding more than one credible source. The easiest part for them was actually conducting the research—they enjoyed the topic. Erica's research and reflection (see Figure 20) portrays a model of students' concern with knowing the difference between credible and non-credible sources—a problem quite common with all my students. I realized from this assignment that I would need to continue to model effective research strategies for my students throughout this writing process in order for them to successfully find such resources.

**My resources:**

- <http://www.thinkbabynames.com/meaning/0>
- <http://www.behindthename.com/name>
- <http://www.babynamespedia.com/meaning/>

**What my name means:**

The name was originally a boys name but is now more commonly used as a girl's name. It is of Greek, French, German, English, and Ancient Greek origin. This name means defender, helper or protector of men. This was then name of a 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC Greek comic poet and also the name of several saints. The feminine use of the name became popular off a famous TV character Alexis Carrington in the 1930's American Soap Opera.

**Reflection Questions:**

1. I have learned that you can't always rely on just one website for information because there information could be wrong so you have to use more than one site to make sure things are right.
2. The hardest part of finding a credible resource is that you may not be able to tell them apart from non-credible resources. The easiest part of finding a credible resource is just finding sites in general even if they don't help you.

*Figure 20.* Erica's name research and answers to the reflective questions.

### *Main Idea Haikus*

Haikus and main ideas may not seem related in any way, but for me, it was a way to help students see the purpose of the essay they worked at composing. This mini lesson came at a time when I felt, through conferencing and working individually with students, that many of my students struggled with identifying the overall purpose of their essays and how that purpose could guide their organization and ideas. I asked students to take their rough drafts out, identify the main idea or purpose of their essay, and express it in a haiku—three simple lines of what the reader should know after reading their essays. Poetry did not thrill students at first, but after modeling the process, students, such as Erica and Sarah, wanted me to read over theirs before we began to share. I worked individually with Isaac and Nathan, as they both struggled with the instructions I provided to the whole group. I began to see that individualized instructions really provided opportunities for all students to succeed, and having a classroom format that allowed me to form trusting relationships with my students gave them the motivation to ask for assistance when they needed it.

After creating the haikus, several students shared theirs to the class. Olivia and Jessica were the first to read aloud their haikus (see Figure 21).

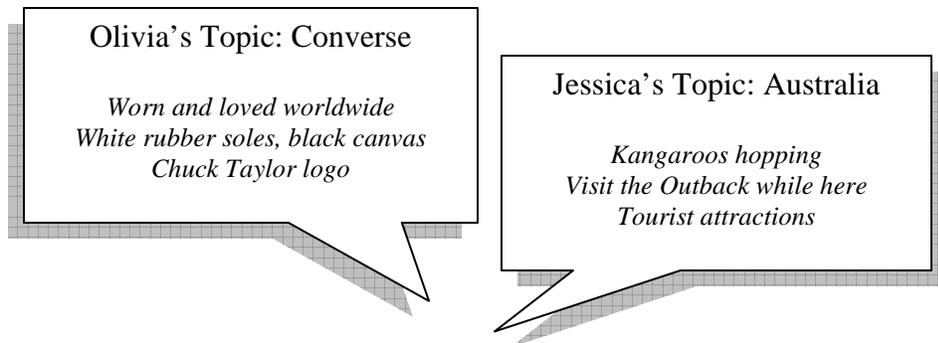


Figure 21. Olivia and Jessica's haikus constructed from the main idea mini lesson for the inform and explain essay.

After sharing, Olivia identified that her main idea in her essay was to explain how Converse started, how the shoe is constructed and what it looks like, and its popularity today. Jessica explained her main ideas on Australia were to describe the tourist attractions and what you would see when exploring Australia, stating her essay would take on the idea that it could serve as a travel guide. I encouraged students to use the main ideas outlined in their haikus as a way to better organize their essays.

“Each topic you explain in your haiku should serve as a different body paragraph,” I explained. As the period continued, I worked with several students in formal and informal conferences to discuss their main ideas and organization—focusing on just these important tasks. Through this mini lesson and my conversations with students, I felt they became better equipped to organize their essay's ideas appropriately, a focus of the inform and explain rubric.

***Imagery: Not Just for the Narrative***

As students finished a second round of rough drafts, I began to notice a trend. Many of their sentences lacked description, and students treated these essays as if I told them to write for a textbook. It seemed, anytime I mentioned the word “research,” students went into a state of understanding that their essays needed to be “boring.” I wanted to show them otherwise. For the next few mini lessons in writing workshop, I spent time discussing imagery and description, and continued to model the revision writing process. I encouraged students to include these items in their informative essays as we developed them.

My first few mini lessons concentrated on the use of the five senses in writing. I discussed with students that often times, novice writers rely on the sense of sight, but forget about the other four senses. We started with the sense of smell, as I encourage students to write a short paragraph describing a familiar smell.

“Does it have to be a good smell?” Harold asked.

“No, any smell that comes to mind,” I responded.

I worked with Danielle to help guide her through her paragraph and the smell of her basement.

“I know the smell in my head, but I can’t figure out how to describe it.” I knew this was a common problem with my students—getting inner thoughts on paper, so I suggested she compare it to memories she might have or similar places

everyone might be familiar with. Her struggle turned to excitement, as she generated her paragraph (see Figure 22).

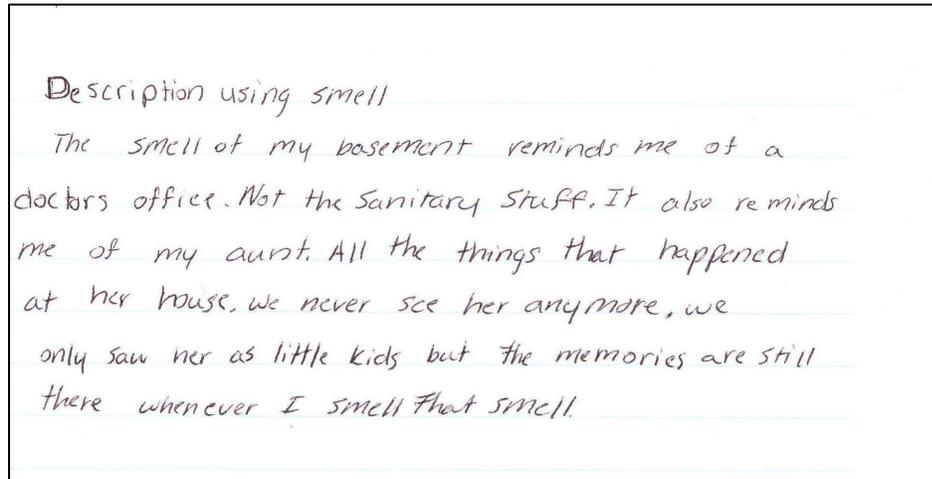


Figure 22. Danielle's descriptive paragraph using the sense of smell.

We continued similar mini lessons with the other four senses, exploring other topics for each and transferring the ideas to the informative essay. We further discussed adding literary devices like similes, metaphors, and so forth to create vivid images in their writing. As we continued to work in writing workshop, I met with students informally as they revised their work. I provided them a short checklist of criteria for their essays of common problem areas I saw students running into through my conversations through informal conferences (see Appendix V). The checklist also included the reflective questions for the scheduled student and teacher conference sessions I began to hold. I encouraged students to make sure they revised their work to meet the criteria in rubric and described in the checklist. Ross cheered when he realized he found everything in

his essay from the first section of the checklist, while Erica called me over to help her make her lead more interesting. I worked with Danielle as well, finding ways to change her question lead into a descriptive paragraph. Isaac and I discussed organizing his information and Candace asked me to read over her first paragraph for feedback. I once again modeled the peer reflection process, reminding students that it was not about editing someone else's paper. All this occurred while students held peer reflection conferences with each other, researched their topics, and wrote diligently. Students stayed on task, demonstrated motivation, and remained interested in improving their essays. We also just finished our adjacent reading unit based on *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and students even wanted to work on their essays, rather than viewing the film version of the novel. Finally, revision took on a role—not as something they dreaded, but a step they felt was necessary.

### ***Conferences Round Three: In a Habit***

By the third round of conferences, students knew exactly what to expect. It no longer surprised them that I wanted to discuss their writing and that they led the conference discussion. I asked students to bring the informative checklist handout to start their conferences. Again, I highlighted Isaac, Aaron, and Candace. While I held individual conferences with students, the rest of the class continued to work on essay revisions, peer reflections, additional individual reflections in the portfolio, and adjacent reading unit assignments.

My first conference session took place with Isaac (see Figure 23). Isaac demonstrated reluctance at first to revise his work, but by starting with some positive, verbal feedback, he found motivation to revise his essay on boxing for description, demonstrating another benefit to the conference format.

<u>Conference Notes/Comments:</u>	<u>Teacher Reflection/Thoughts:</u>
Isaac stated he did not have anything he needed to work on in his essay. I started by saying the quote he used to begin his essay was a great way to draw his reader's attention.	Not again! I thought we were finally over this!
Isaac: "Well, I thought, what could I say that could draw people's attention?" Mrs. Binkley: "Well, you certainly accomplished it."	Starting with a positive at the beginning of a conference sets a motivating tone for the whole conference.
Our conversation transferred to adding more description to his essay.	
Isaac: "So, if I say tussled instead of fought, that verb gives a better visualization and is more descriptive?" Mrs. Binkley: "Exactly. You're looking for verbs that say more than just simple action. You want to use verbs that actually show meaning behind that action—what do you see when you see the verb walk—it can be lots of things, but if I say swayed, I see something more detailed and visual."	Clarifying for himself! This is great!
Mrs. Binkley: "Best writing yet Isaac."	Sometimes re-teaching a lesson for clarity is what these conferences need to be about—meeting each student's individual needs.
Isaac claps his hands and expresses his excitement as he leaves our conference. "Yes! Because it's about a topic I enjoy quite well!"	I am proud of how much Isaac has accomplished. His writing did not need a lot of work, but I hope he eventually realizes he never should stop trying to improve.

*Figure 23.* Isaac's student and teacher conference notes on the inform and explain essay.

I held one of my next conference sessions with Aaron (see Figure 24). Aaron and I discussed the flow in his essay on snowboarding and changes he could make to some of his sentence structures. I modeled ways to vary sentences by showing him how to avoid starting two sentences in a row with the same beginning. We also discussed words and phrases he could use to better transition his ideas from one to another. Again, Aaron's conference shows his unique needs being met through one-on-one instruction individualized for him.

<u>Conference Notes/Comments:</u>	<u>Teacher Reflection/Thoughts:</u>
Aaron: "I don't like the way my essay flows right now. Also, paragraphs. I don't know what to do."	Aaron knows exactly what he wants to work on and change about his essay. He's willing to make those changes.
We worked on applying different sentence structures so his writing is less choppy.	I meet quite frequently with Aaron outside of conferences as well. He is always seeking advice on his work from either myself or his peers. I am so happy to see him flourishing in this unit.
I modeled a variety of sentence structure processes for editing.	
We talked about where one idea ends and another begins.	
Aaron: "Okay, I see how this is going to help. Thanks Mrs. Binkley!"	I love when students leave a conference happy with what they learned and accomplished!

*Figure 24.* Aaron's student and teacher conference notes on the inform and explain essay.

Candace and I first discussed items she had not checked off on the informative checklist (see Figure 25). Her initiation of this conversation with her concern over these items led our discussion to comparing and contrasting the

medical jargon she used in her essay on hydrocephalus to every day language and terms her audience would understand.

<u>Conference Notes/Comments:</u>	<u>Teacher Reflection/Thoughts:</u>
<p>Candace does not have two items checked off on her informative checklist, so she asks about these items first.</p> <p>We start by working with her lead and discuss how she could use different strategies, mapping out some examples. We transfer to adding personality and description to her essay.</p> <p>Mrs. Binkley: “It’s something not everyone knows about, so that helps give interest—perhaps think about using jargon that always makes sense to your reader—put yourself in your reader’s shoes—would they know what this means?”</p>	<p>Student honesty in what needs to improve!</p> <p>Again, personal assistance to each student through conferencing is overwhelmingly meaningful to each of my students. I feel like each student feels valued and I feel like I am making worthwhile use of each student’s time.</p>
<p>We talk about ways to use comparing and contrasting and other literary devices in informative writing—</p> <p>Candace: “Like if I compare brain swelling to a balloon.”</p> <p>Mrs. Binkley: “Exactly.”</p>	<p>Generating examples in conferences again provides meaningful instruction for the individual student.</p>

*Figure 25.* Student and teacher conference notes with Candace on the inform and explain essay.

Meeting in these conferences again solidified the importance of recognizing individual student’s needs. Each conference session yet again created a unique experience that catered to students’ abilities to meet their writing goals. With answers to the reflective questions provided, students came prepared as the conference began and guided the conference format. This allowed students to

take charge of the topics of the conference session. To be honest, I never thought ninth graders held the capability to carry such control of their learning and could demonstrate substantial success in it. I felt a sense of comfort knowing they proved me wrong.

Another unit neared its end. Students made revisions and completed the editing process. After assessing the essays, I returned them and students completed another round of reflections. I yet again saw students improve their ideas, organization, and leads. The time came to start thinking about preparing and organizing the final portfolio.

### **Resume: I Need to Plan for the Future?**

It is never too early to plan for the future...at least that was always what adults told me as an adolescent. I did not quite understand why I needed to plan early, but I soon found out that the future was closer than I thought. Now, in a flash forward 12 years later, I played the role of an adult passing on the same advice to my students. The final writing unit before the conclusion of this study was the resume. To meet state graduate requirements and in lieu of a graduation exam, my district developed a career exploration plan for each student, starting in seventh grade. In ninth grade, students must complete two forms of career exploration testing and write a professional resume. One of the exams, part of a program on [careercruising.com](http://careercruising.com), and the resume, take place in English class. Students continue to take these exams and revise their resume each year after, in

preparation for high school graduation. A vastly different form of writing from our previous experiences, and a new one as well, I knew it was important to provide meaningful instruction for students to be successful in this assignment.

### ***Career Cruising***

As mentioned earlier, the career exploration process began in our classroom by completing an exam met to match specific careers up to students based on their interests and abilities. Each student received a login and password to the website [careercruising.com](http://careercruising.com) where they completed the exam and then generated their own resume. We started with the exam, as I walked students through the sign-on process and explained the purposes of the exam. I also modeled the process on the projector screen through my computer, as I received my own login and password, filling out the information as we worked through the website. After taking the exams, students received a list of careers that matched their exam responses. Once they received the results, I encouraged students to look through the career requirements. By clicking on the career, the link directed students to information that explicated the career, the requirements as far as education and experience, and salary information based on state averages. Students also received information on the website about schooling options in different states, along with specific majors and other pertinent information on prerequisites to their career results. Students then saved three careers of their

choice and their information to a section on the website identified as favorite careers.

After students completed the exams and explored their results, the instructions led them to fill out sections of information about their past job experiences, schooling, extracurricular activities, awards, and other information often found in a resume. After students completed these sections, a resume generated from the computer system based off the information. Students exported their resume to a word document, formatted it to one page, revised for language, and edited basic conventional mistakes. This process took about five days to complete. Once students finished, they held a professional resume they could utilize to apply for a job that very day.

On the first day of this process, it was nearly impossible for me to take field notes on our experiences because of so many questions from students and the demand of most of the instruction in class being teacher-directed. I wrote my thoughts about how the first session went at the end of the class:

*This is truly the first completely teacher-directed learning experience we have had through this study. I am going to need to find a better way to observe my students because right now taking down notes as I watch my students work is not working.*

I realized this writing unit was unique in many ways. I decided to take field notes on this experience by shadowing a new student each day. After

reflecting, I made a point to concentrate my observations on three students. I chose Isaac, Aaron, and Candace because their stories as students in my classroom had already taken shape through their conferences. Shadowing them would allow me to triangulate data with conference discussions. After writing observations about each student, I included my reflections on their experiences in class. To complete each shadow log, I jotted down notes every five minutes on each student's physical and verbal behaviors. If I thought something the student said was pertinent, I wrote down that exact quote. After completing these field notes, I compared the data I collected to other forms created by the student, such as previous field notes, conference notes, and student work, and then developed a first person narrative for each student. Some of the sentences in the narratives came directly from the students themselves. To ensure my narratives displayed authenticity in creating each student's voice, I shared them with each student. In doing so, I asked if I portrayed the student's experience in class that day effectively and took suggestions for changes to the narratives if necessary.

*Isaac*

*We worked on our resumes today. Mrs. Binkley's working on play stuff, so there was "yellow brick road" all over my desk. Didn't bother me though. I got to sit in the back, closer to her desk. It was easier for me to ask questions without people giving me a hard time about it. My computer was being really slow today. By the time I got signed on, everyone else already started. Then, I*

*kept typing in the web address and it kept saying it couldn't take me there. Mrs. Binkley came over and showed me I typed it wrong. I always do that. I was really behind at first. I hate being behind. Luckily, Mrs. Binkley likes me, so she helped me catch up.*

*I remembered doing these surveys last year. I believe I was supposed to be a professional dancer...or a stuntman. I do not want to be a professional dancer. Danger is more my thing. I would be really good at being a stuntman.*

*Mrs. Binkley did a lot of talking today. That's not usually her style. I had to repeat what she said a lot to myself to keep up. Otherwise, I forget what I'm suppose to do. So what if other people hear me...ugh...some of the questions made no sense to me. I reread them, but there's words that just don't mean anything to me. Mrs. Binkley had to explain them. I still didn't get a few, so I just picked "it doesn't matter" for most of my responses, even though she told me I shouldn't do that. I don't know what I want to do right now. I don't know what I want to do tomorrow, yet alone in the future.*

*After I finished my quiz, I got results like furnisher finisher, which I assume is someone who makes furniture, and inventor. Those aren't me at all. Mrs. Binkley told me I need to take the skills test now. More questions on what I'm good at. I'm not good at reading. I'm getting better at writing, but I don't want to do it forever. I don't know what I'm good at either. Paying attention to detail, being a leader...I guess I'm okay at those things. Now drawing...those*

*questions were easy for me. You should have seen the wolf I drew in art class. I could get \$100...easy. After answering my questions, I didn't get very good results. A lot of times, it doesn't really matter. Mrs. Binkley told me I didn't pick very clear answers. She said my responses were just suggestions—that I shouldn't think that they are really what I have to become. I'm glad Mrs. Binkley doesn't get annoyed when I ask lots of questions. Some teachers do. I don't like those teachers.*

I like to refer to Isaac as my questioner. Even if he does not have a question, he still wants my help. Differentiated instruction became key in making sure Isaac felt comfortable in what he completed in my class. Knowing he could talk to me without feeling a sense of frustration from my end comforted him. He regularly verbalized he liked sitting by my desk during this time, because while I was at my computer modeling the resume process for the class, he could quick ask a question or tell me he did not understand something and I was right there to help him. No scene. Just guidance. Exactly what every student wants.

*Aaron*

*I like Mrs. Binkley. She's one of the few teachers I can hold a conversation with. I'm looking forward to going to see the play. The extra credit won't hurt. I need to fill out my extracurricular activities today. I've got a lot to get done. I decided to sit with Isaac. It works better for me to sit next to him away from the rest of the class. Makes me feel special. Plus I get more done.*

*Sometimes the other students are distracting. I don't like being distracted. I like to work in the quiet...otherwise people get annoying. I'm half way done. Harold and Isaac helped me with some of the awards. We played baseball together. Couldn't remember some of the dates. I think it's redonculous that you have to remember the dates. Who does that? I have like 100 awards to put on my resume. I spent most of the period working on that. Mrs. Binkley helped me narrow them down when I asked her, but I still don't understand why I can't list them all. Wouldn't that be a good thing? This one page thing is hard. Thank god she helped me.*

*I want to be a teacher like Mrs. Binkley. Except teach gym...I like sports and you get to run around and play all day. Writing a book like Mrs. Binkley would be hard. I wonder if gym teachers have to do that?*

Teaching is hard, yet very rewarding. Getting to work with students such as Aaron is proof of that. I watched a quiet student, who seemed to fit in with the group, but that I could not quite read, grow to a student who willingly asked questions and took chances in his writing, along with valued my feedback. There is nothing more important than when a student is struggling, for that student to feel comfortable enough to approach you to ask questions, in front of the class, without feeling as if he or she failed. Aaron was a student who demonstrated that through building a supportive classroom environment, a strong rapport between student and teacher could be created. A teacher truly becomes a role model for

the student. For instance, through validating my first person narrative, I had the opportunity to meet with Aaron. We talked about the requirements for becoming a teacher, and whether or not requirements such as writing a thesis were something he would need to consider if he became a gym teacher. When Aaron struggled with the classroom environment, he told me. Often times, such as in this one, he would ask to sit away from the group so he would not get distracted. During writing workshop, if students talked in a distracting manner around him or he did not want to get off task, even if those students were doing what they were suppose to be doing, he would ask to go out in the hall so he could work. I questioned at first if he was just trying to get out of work, but I soon learned that perhaps a “busy” environment, with everyone doing his or her own thing, did not work for each student. Meeting each student’s individual needs does.

*Candace*

*I helped Erica today get through her resume. She’s been sick, so I felt she needed me more than I needed to work. I already finished my resume anyways. I worked on it at home. I wanted to get it done. I do so much, narrowing it down to one page was nearly impossible. I don’t like talking about myself. It was fun seeing what the surveys say you should be. Mine says I should be a teacher, which is exactly what I want to be. I like explaining things to people. They listen to you and want to know what you have to say. Erica was getting frustrated, though. I know what it is like to be absent and not know what’s going on. I’ve*

*learned I have to work hard at home, otherwise I would just get mad. I hope I helped a little. I'm not here all the time, so it's nice to work with other students when I can. I worked on my reading project the rest of the class. After Mrs. Binkley showed me how to print, she told me I could work ahead. I prefer being ahead. I hate being behind.*

Through my shadow log, I saw teacher qualities in Candace. She was my go-to student throughout this study any time I needed someone to explain directions or redirect another student while I was in a conference or working with someone else. Although occasionally her absences hindered her ability to thrive through classroom interaction, she gained confidence in giving other students directions and easily talked with her peers. I happily observed her working with Erica because she often was the one who needed directions because of her absences. Candace is a hard worker, always striving to be the best she possibly can be. She is a very motivated student, and her work ethic, concentration, and on task behavior in class demonstrated this to me every day during my study. Candace did not like students pointing out that she was usually ahead of the game—and they noticed this frequently because she was absent and still had her work done ahead of time. Therefore, anytime she could use this to her advantage, to form a bond with another student through re-explaining an essay, she felt more like part of the classroom community.

### *Changing the Conference Format*

As students worked on their resumes, I decided it was the right time to begin introducing the final stages of preparation for the writing portfolio. I felt rushed. We barely made it through the last writing unit of this study, and I did not feel ready to end this process. Putting together a portfolio at this point did not sit well with me. There was so much for me to learn, explore, and inquire with my students. I found that I needed to convince myself that this was just the beginning, not the end, and that collecting initial portfolios at this point was okay. I decided to consider this portfolio collection process a mid-analysis of my students' learning. Portfolios were not going to end in my classroom at this point, but I would end this particular study. I knew I wanted to conference with students about their resumes, but I also wanted to meet with students about their final portfolios. Scheduling two separate conferences within a two-week period for each student would simply not be possible. Therefore, I made the executive decision to go to the students when they needed me through the resume creation process. I still ensured I met with each student as they generated their resumes, but I decided to go directly to each student, instead of scheduling a time to meet with them in a formal conference. Because of the assessment requirements of this assignment, this conference process seemed to be the best fit. The only criterion for this writing assignment was conventions, which included formatting, spelling,

and punctuation. The process worked for the assignment, and I realized the following, which I recorded in the reflections I made in my field notes:

*Each assignment brings its own challenges and experiences. I think the resume is the most powerful learning experience my students will have this year. I realize that just because I did not put the label of “conference” on the teacher-student talk I have with students, does not mean it is not meaningful. I am still conferencing with my students. The difference is, not only are they running the conference, they are deciding when they need to conference. In actuality, this is exactly what I wanted. Students leading their own learning...the training wheels are off...the wheels rolling.*

During the conferences, I discussed the individual needs of each student, as they arose for each the student. Highlighting the same students I did with conferences in the past, I met with Isaac, as we discussed some of the struggles he had with formatting his paper to one page and brainstorming a second reference source. We also discussed avoiding the use of first person in his resume. Collaborating, Aaron and I also discussed formatting issues, and worked on organizing and narrowing down his extra-curricular activities, which I highlighted in his first person narrative. Candace and I created a job title for the work experiences she completed over the summer at a horse stable. Each meeting was uniquely designed specifically for the student, led by the student, and met each

student's needs. At this point, conferences were a part of our classroom society—something to be expected.

### **Pulling It All Together: The Portfolio**

As career exploration continued and students worked on their resumes, I introduced how to present the final portfolio. I handed out the assignment sheet (see Appendix W), an introductory reflective letter outline (see Appendix X), and the final portfolio rubric (see Appendix Y) that explained what would go in the portfolio, how to set it up, and the assessment criteria. I explained to students the required items that needed to be present in the portfolio, and how students had some choice in the rest. I stressed to students they had the opportunity to revise any of their work as part of the portfolio.

Next, I explained that their final writing assignment for the portfolio was a reflective letter. Candace spoke excitedly about writing a letter, but Erica felt a little less enthused, stating, “I don't like all the requirements.”

I again explained to students that the letter provided a format for reflection, but what they wrote about was their choice. I explained to students that I would model the letter writing process next class and hoped Erica would come around to see its value.

I had been saying portfolio, portfolio, portfolio this whole writing process. I realized I needed to give students an example of what that might actually look like. Placing work in a folder and writing reflections, students did not have a

connection on how this work would transform. Out came the big binder. I presented the portfolio I created for my undergraduate work.

“We don’t have to make one that big, do we?” Danielle asked.

“Of course not. This is several years of work,” I responded. “I would not expect you to do that much for just two quarters of writing assignments.”

As relief swept across the room, I walked around and showed some of the items and reflections I wrote, as students began to make comments and realizations about what other jobs and future experiences, other than teaching, require a portfolio. I continued to explain that I wanted students to view this portfolio process as a mid-analysis of their work.

“Think of it as a way to say, *what have I done so far to reach my goals, what work shows this, and what do I still need to do this year?*” The period ended, and I asked students to think about these questions and bring in a binder within the next few days to begin transforming their folder of writing into a writing portfolio.

Students’ folders were packed to the brim, piled in the back of the room. Not only had they completed written assessments in the writing units for this study, but students completed other writing assignments throughout adjacent reading and grammar units. Our next class began as students rummaged through their writing to mark which pieces they wanted to include in their final portfolio. I encouraged students to mark those items with a star or some other marking, but

not to throw out other items, just in case once they started to write their letters, they changed their minds on what items they would use.

As students worked through this process, I overheard Harold and Ross talk about the items they selected, inquiring about their choices with one another, as Harold mentioned to me, “You should have an option for an item in the portfolio being the biggest pain in the butt assignment,” as many students laughed. I chuckled a bit myself, realizing the truth that not every assignment “spoke” to my students.

“Perhaps you will want to mention that item as the one you struggled with the most,” I replied.

I also met with Nathan, as he asked clarifying questions about the assignment, inquiring how the final portfolio would be put together. Candace pulled me over to see if we could briefly conference on how to make changes on her express and reflect essay.

“Absolutely. Let’s see what we can come up with.” We worked on the elements in her rubric that lacked proficiency. She expressed her confidence with the assignment and inquired on the purpose of the portfolio.

I explained, “It is basically *who am I as a writer* in a binder. You collect all your work, you tell me about your experiences writing these pieces, and I see what you have learned and how you have worked at achieving your goals.”

As I finished with Candace, Erica called, “Can you come here and look through to see if I can use all of this stuff.” She wanted clarification that the items she selected for her portfolio would show her learning. Genuinely, she seemed into the process and wanted my feedback. Excitedly, I noted everything finally came into focus for her, as I told her all the assignments were excellent choices and she continued to work.

Harold inquired if he could talk about all of his journaling for one entry in his portfolio. I responded that doing so was a great idea. Bianca and Leslie conversed about their portfolio items and read each other’s reflections. Questions, meaningful conversations, and reflection continued the rest of the period, as I worked my way around the room to meet with students.

We continued this process the next day, as I encouraged students to finish any individual reflections on the assignments they planned to include in their portfolio. I observed students willingly look over their work, noting both the good and the bad. Aaron, after reading over a comment I wrote on a final draft of an essay, stated, “Thank you Mrs. Binkley. That makes me feel good.” All types of feedback were important to my students—not just the verbal.

Candace inquired, “So, we won’t have a folder the rest of the year?”

“No, you’ll have your binder,” I responded.

“Will we keep using them?” she inquired.

“Oh, yes, we’ll keep using them and adding assignments throughout

the year—as we continue to grow in our writing abilities and complete more assignments,” I assured her.

“Oh, good. This is cool,” she said with a smile on her face. Purpose. This assignment had purpose. I realized not only then, but throughout this process, making sure that my assignments and activities in class had purpose for my students became essential in motivating them to meet their goals.

### ***The Introductory Reflective Letter***

Students gathered and reflected on their individual writing pieces. It was time to model the introductory reflective letter where students would reflect on the portfolio process as a whole. Aaron entered the room excitedly, stating he brought his binder for class today. As more students filed in, Isaac inquired, “Are you almost done your book, Mrs. Binkley?”

“Yes, Isaac. I only have a few more days I can take notes, so I will then be finished with all my note taking and I will begin to take those notes and turn them into my book—I will continue to tell you about my writing as I create my book next marking period,” I explained.

“That’s cool,” he responded.

Class began. I modeled the letter writing process for students by writing an example letter with them as they asked questions. When students demonstrated they were ready, I sent them off to write, as I began conference sessions individually with students over the next few days. In our portfolio

workshop, Ross asked questions about the difference between the individual reflections and the letter. I explained that the individual reflections should be based on that particular assignment and that the letter should show me how learning took place so far this year by connecting all of the assignments.

I overheard Erica and Candace working together. Erica was absent when I explained the introductory reflective letter. Candace willingly helped her outline her letter, but Erica still seemed frustrated with the process. Not feeling well, she asked to leave for the nurse. Upon her return, she continued to feel frustrated and behind. I checked in with her as she continued to work. She expressed she knew what she was doing, but felt frustrated at the possibility of getting behind in her work. I reassured her that she had plenty of time, and that I would schedule our conference last so that she could catch-up on the items she needed to work on individually. Slightly relieved, she continued to write her letter.

I also met with Bianca, as she asked clarification for some of the sections on the letter. I met with Patricia as well, as she expressed, “I think writing rough drafts are easy—because they don’t have to be perfect.” What a great realization by Patricia. I recognized at this point that the opportunities I gave students to brainstorm and practice their writing before handing in a final copy really paid off. They saw the value in this process as much as I did.

As I hole-punched many students' papers to begin placing them in their binders, the period ended. Erica came back with a stack, as I asked her how she felt now that she had some time to work.

"Yes, I'm better," she responded. "I just needed to relax a bit!"

### ***Conferences: A Bittersweet End in Sight***

Even though I knew this would not be the last time I would meet formally with my students, I still began conferences with mixed emotions. I felt happy that everything in my study came together, that my note-taking and hard work paid off. I did feel a bit weary that my study was ending too soon—that I did not collect all the data I needed to see the real results of writing portfolios in my classroom. I continued to reassure myself that I accomplished what I could in four months of school. I would continue to work hard to meet my students' needs long after this study concluded.

First, I met with Isaac (see Figure 26). He struggled to explain himself so that I, his audience, could understand the points he made about what he learned in the portfolio assignments. After his formal conference, Isaac asked to meet with me a second time.

"Can you look over my paper again?" he asked.

"Of course!" I responded. After reading over his introductory reflective letter, I said, "Wow! Isaac, you have achieved a lot today and you made some great improvements in organizing and explaining yourself in this letter."

“Thanks, I was in the zone!” Isaac said.

He was in the zone. He demonstrated motivation and worked diligently all period after our conference. He knew what he needed to revise and work on because I gave him the individualized instruction he needed in order to be successful this period.

<u>Conference Notes/Comments:</u>	<u>Teacher Reflection/Thoughts:</u>
Isaac asked for help before the period began. We discussed how he needs to avoid being vague in his writing—specifically his reflective letter.	Motivated and ready to begin before we even start! This is great!
Mrs. Binkley: “Make sure you make specific references to why a piece was good-not just because you liked it—tell me why you liked it—give me specific reasons.”	My blanket statements might be vague for students who struggle. Meeting in these conferences really helped me clarify for those students who needed me to without wasting the time of others who already understood the concept and felt ready to go ahead and work.
Isaac: “Yeah, I have trouble with that.” We go through each of his paragraphs and identify his writing pieces and come up with reasons together. I model the first one, he continues the rest himself.	
Isaac: “Okay, so I should make a paragraph for this section and one for this one, along with each other one as well?”	It is so great as a teacher not to get the “yeah, I understand” and head nod, but instead get the clarifying question or comment that shows me he understands!
Mrs. Binkley: “Yes, you want to make sure each section gets referenced in your letter—either in a paragraph or another way you feel is a good way to organize it, but it seems like you are on the right track.”	

*Figure 26.* Isaac’s student and teacher conference notes on the final portfolio.

I next met with Aaron (see Figure 27), as he prompted his scheduled conference before I could schedule times for conferences that period. He felt

confused about some of the requirements in the letter, and his conference served as a method to answer those questions.

<u>Conferences Notes/Comments:</u>	<u>Teacher Reflection/Thoughts:</u>
Aaron brings back his assignment sheet, letter, and portfolio, sits down and asks a question, "I don't understand this part—can you explain it."	Students comfortable asking questions without me fishing for trouble!
It is the part with the three descriptive words. I read it over with Aaron and reword it. I give him an example to model the process.	Sometimes just rewording and an example is all it takes.
Aaron: "So, like my snowboarding essay shows how I'm comical as a writer."	
Mrs. Binkley: "Exactly. You want to find a piece of your writing that reflects that characteristic you are as a writer."	When students give an example back, pertaining to their work, showing me they understand ... it is like icing on a cake. This conference has purpose and meaning for the student!
Aaron: "Makes sense. Thanks!"	

*Figure 27.* Aaron's student and teacher conference notes on the final portfolio.

Aaron's conference provides an example of how a conference can be used as an opportunity for a student to speak out about what he or she does not understand in an assignment without having to approach the teacher in front of a full classroom. So often students walk in and out of a classroom without ever asking for help because they are embarrassed or do not feel comfortable doing so, feeling as if they will be put down. Our classroom climate became supportive. Mistakes allowed. Questions encouraged. Learning essential. These aspects made conferences a successful means of instruction for my students.

As my conference sessions ended, I met one last time with Candace (see Figure 28). Through her conference, I realized the importance of students' honesty in their introductory reflective letters in revealing the true realizations students made about their learning experiences in my classroom.

<u>Conference Notes/Comments:</u>	<u>Teacher Reflection/Thoughts:</u>
<p>Candace and I had a lot of information meetings about her letter and portfolio in addition to this one.</p> <p>Mrs. Binkley: "I'm glad you were honest and truthful with yourself in your letter and reflection. It shows me that you really took this assignment seriously. Thank you for that."</p> <p>Candace: "Well, I wanted to be honest about what I accomplished and what I need to work on. It really did show me how I am as a writer. I think this portfolio thing is cool. I can't wait to keep adding pieces to it."</p>	<p>At this point in my study, I realized that students were now in charge of making their "appointment." They had become directors in their own learning.</p> <p>Candace and I had a nice conversation about the purposes of portfolios. Her honesty was a ray of light for me, as I saw students really reflecting and being honest with themselves, taking responsibility for their accomplishments and shortcomings.</p>

*Figure 28.* Candace's student and teacher conference notes on the final portfolio.

I learned so much about my students from these conference sessions. As they progressed, students felt comfortable opening up about their struggles in writing and became directors of their own learning, noting things they saw as weaknesses. Opened to my advice, and even after changes, students came back to make sure they completed their writing to the best of their ability. Reflection no longer seemed tedious to my students. They demonstrated enthusiasm and motivation about putting the portfolio together. The vision I presented to them at

the beginning of the year came together. I developed a strong repertoire with each of my students, a respect and understanding that would continue with each of us through the rest of the year.

### **Not an End, Just a Stepping Stone**

We were there. A few days of work, conferences, clarifying questions, collaboration—the ideal writing workshop, and it was time to hand in the final portfolios.

“Mrs. Binkley, do you want to look over my portfolio,” Isaac anxiously asked, as he entered the room, completed portfolio out, ready in front of me, before I could even respond. I paged through and read Isaac’s letter (see Figure 29), as we laughed together at Isaac’s signature, which he signed, “your favorite student.” As more students entered the room, their excitement gleamed as well, as I looked over portfolios and read over more letters, such as Aaron’s (see Figure 30) and Candace’s (see Figure 31). The period began as students, already engaged in the class, shared insights and items in their portfolios with one another, as we held a class conversation on the writing processes we went through. Students were positive, yet relieved that the process was over.

Later in my reflections, I noted that the introductory reflective letters and portfolios truly provided a strong insight into students’ strengths, weaknesses, and ability to learn. I realized what students wanted to be when they graduated high school and even college, what goals they wanted to accomplish, and how they

wanted to accomplish them. I realized my own strengths and weaknesses in the lessons I provided, realizing that perhaps I did not spend as much time on the conventions of each writing piece as I would have liked, while developing goals for myself as an educator for the upcoming year. Biondi (2001) was correct. I really did learn more about each student as a learner and an individual.

After our portfolio celebration, I asked students to fill out the post-study survey. I reassured them that this process had just begun, as I collected the binders. As I piled them up on the counter, my heart skipped a couple of beats, realizing the vastness of data sitting there in front of me. *How was I going to get through it?* I started by analyzing my post-study surveys by developing a pastiche (see Figure 32). As the period ended, I could not wait to read the results. My students' feedback was honest, critical, and meaningful. The suggestions they made were items I had thought of as well. What I saw them learn, they expressed they did so as well. Even though not every student thought the portfolio process was worthwhile, all students learned something about themselves as writers. Now it was time for my journey in writing to begin.

Dear Mrs. Binkley,

My portfolio is organized by what I think is the best writing to the worst. The goals I created at the beginning of the year guided me through my learning because it allowed me to be determined and stick to what I needed achieve. With hard work, I was able to write better and keep my grades up.

My portfolios show I am a very good and creative writer. Also, my portfolio shows that I am a hard worker. All the writing pieces in my portfolio are examples of how I work hard and am very creative with my writing.

My best piece of work is my narrative essay on life without television. This piece of writing is really good because it is very creative and organized well. I like the way I set it up as an interview, which made it unique.

My favorite piece of writing is my informative essay. This piece was written about boxing. The reason that this is my favorite is because I am a boxer and I really enjoy writing about something that I like to do.

The piece that shows my best effort is also my boxing essay. The reason that I tried so hard in this essay is because I love writing about boxing and I wanted to make sure I did my best.

I want you to notice all the hard work that I put out this year and how much better of a writer I've become. I think I have grown because you helped me with my essays in conferences. I think my strengths are my introductions. It used to be a weakness, but now I can write a strong, catchy intro.

Next year I plan on working to improve description in my writing by adding more descriptive words and details in my body paragraphs. I think I will be able to write much better later in the year and next year with your help.

Sincerely,

  
 (your favorite student)

  
 I am happy to read your realization that hard work does pay off. We will continue to work hard the next year so that you may reach your goals!

Figure 29. Isaac's introductory reflective letter to his portfolio.

Dear Mrs. Binkley,

I organized my portfolio with a few of my select writing pieces. In my table of contents, you can see that all of my writing pieces are in alphabetical order. Each of the pieces in my portfolio I am proud of, so that is why I put so much work into this portfolio.

One goal this year for me was to become a better writer. In that way my goals were to improve my handwriting, get an interest in writing back, think of better ideas for my writing, and improve my vocabulary. My summer reading piece helped me with all of these goals because the book made me want to write, gave me more vocabulary words to use, gave me ideas to write about, and I did an excellent job on handwriting the essay.

I think that you should learn from this portfolio that I am a good, well rounded, and comical writer. The essay that displays this is my information essay on snowboarding. This piece allowed me to be a better writer because I added more components than usual to make the essay even better. Snowboarding is a topic that I enjoy a lot so if I like the topic I'm writing about I am bound to do well. This is also my best piece of work because I had no spelling errors, very minor grammar mistakes, and it included many descriptive words. I also think it's my best piece because my voice was heard throughout the entire essay.

My favorite piece I wrote this year was the rewrite the ending assignment. This gave me a chance to use new words and make the story my own. It also let my imagination take its course to write another ending to an already exciting story. My favorite part about this piece is that I got to include a moral to the story, which meant that this story was not all fun and games, but it had meaning behind it.

The piece that shows my best effort is my summer reading essay. For this particular essay I had to read a book. It gave me an insight on new words used in the book to make a new level of writing for myself. Another thing about this essay is that I took more time than usual to write a very neat final draft.

I have grown from the portfolio because I now realize that I am can be a good writer. I thought I was a mediocre writer before, but I finally realized that I can have good sentence structure and use more sophisticated words when I try. Doing this writing portfolio helped me become a better writer because I have more confidence in what I am doing. Next year I plan on stepping it up in all aspects of writing to the next level. I want to just totally put the readers of my pieces in awe. This year I wanted to improve handwriting, get an interest back in writing, think of new ideas, and improve my vocabulary. I did all of that minus the handwriting. I can always do better in my rough drafts and journal entries. This isn't good enough for me because I want to go on and be an inspiring writer by the time I finish high school. I will keep trying my hardest to achieve my goals.

Sincerely,




Thank you for sharing  
your insights. I look forward  
to seeing each piece reveal  
your learning.

Figure 30. Aaron's introductory reflective letter to his portfolio.

Dear Mrs. Binkley,

My portfolio is organized in an order that shows what some of my favorite pieces of writing are. I put them this way to show you what type of writer I am. It also shows you what type of writing I like to use. If this order is confusing to you, or you would like to read a certain piece of writing, please refer to the Table of Contents.

The goals I created at the beginning of the year guided me through my learning because it helped me realize what I had to work on. I believe that I have accomplished my goals of getting A's and my grammar has improved. Also, a goal that I had trouble improving on is with summarizing my thoughts. The To Kill A Mockingbird journal entries, including the chapter six to chapter eleven entries in my portfolio, helped me to practice this skill. This is because very thought provoking questions were assigned, but there was too much information to elaborate and you had to summarize.

My portfolio shows that I am creative, imaginative, and flexible. As a writer, I like to use my imagination to pretend to be someone else. I like to use my ability to be creative, by making my writing pieces descriptive and interesting. As a writer, I have also learned to be flexible with my writing, in order to follow the guidelines. I have learned to delete and add things that may be too much or not descriptive enough. I believe that my "Full Circle" journal entry shows and explains why I think that these three descriptive words work for me. It shows that I am imaginative by showing that I can write in the perspective of someone completely different than myself. It shows that I am creative because I was very descriptive in the piece. Also it displays my flexibility because I wrote the story with the story line already lined out for me and the ending already decided.

My best piece of work is the summer reading essay. Over the summer I read Sleeping Freshmen Never Lie. As I was reading, I took a highlighter and pen, and marked up the book. I took note of my reactions to what I was reading, questions, vocabulary misunderstandings, and anything else that came to mind. This was a good strategy because when it was writing time, I had everything right in front of me. The letter to Mouth about suicide was a strong but sensitive topic for me from a past experience. The piece was fun to write and I found myself wanting others to read it to.

My favorite piece of work is my inform and explain essay. This is my favorite piece of writing in my portfolio because I enjoy this kind of writing a lot. I like to be factual and informative when writing. I believe that it also may have been one of my best pieces in the portfolio. I tend to like to learn about new things and taking notes. I would love to do this as a side job.

The piece that shows my best effort is my "Full Circle" journal. I believe that this piece shows my best effort as a writer because it was fun and interesting to write. I planned with a flowchart to organize what information I was going to include and where to place it in the piece. I also was allowed to write it in a way that I would have imagined it to be like. This involves a lot of thinking, especially when you already have a chosen climax and ending. That was an obstacle that made me imagine like a writer and try to think of how I could work around it but still keep the piece interesting.

I want you to notice that when I do not like a type of writing, I don't try as hard as hard as I could. It is a fault of mine as a writer. For example a piece of writing that this is present in is my resume. I am active in a lot of things and my life is crazy. Because of this, I tend to feel uncomfortable writing about myself. Another piece is my chapter six journal entry that I had a lot of trouble on. I am not very good with dialog and have trouble with keeping up a constant conversation with no narration in between like in story. A third piece is my name origin activity. I am weak at writing up summarization and sometimes get confused with what the most important information is.

I think I have grown because I have learned how to begin and end my essays in a more orderly manner. A weakness in my portfolio is that some of my pieces tend to get a little boring. A strength in my portfolio is that it is on a variety of topics and that each individual piece is in a different form of writing. Through this portfolio project, I have grown as a writer because I have learned how to be more descriptive in my writing. This brings my pieces to life and helps to form a mental image in the reader's head. In other words, this portfolio has taught me one of the most valuable lessons in the writing field that I can think of, it has taught me how to make my writing interesting and descriptive.

Next year, I plan on working on my ability to keep a reader's attention. I also plan to continue working on making my writing more descriptive. I also would like to try new styles of writing and write about new topics. I am happy that I have accomplished my goal of keeping A's so far. I would also like to continue this for the rest of the year. I also wish to continue to make and achieve my goals each and every day. I am excited for the new year of new writing experiences and challenges that I have ahead of me.

Sincerely,

A large black rectangular redaction box covers the signature area, obscuring the name and any handwritten notes or dates.

Your letter is well  
thought at and displays  
some powerful realizations  
about your writing experiences.  
Nice job!

Figure 31. Candace's introductory reflective letter to her portfolio.

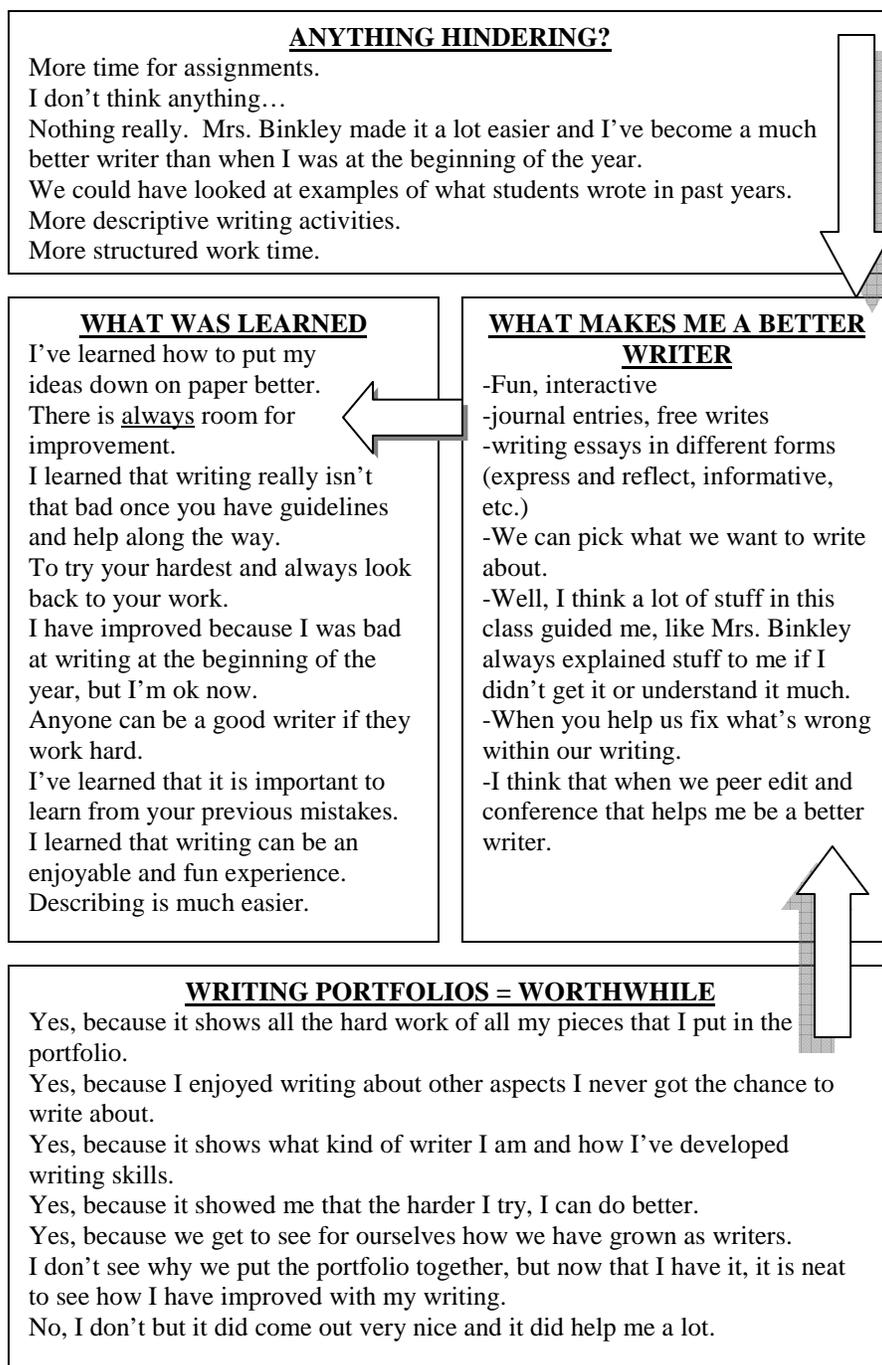


Figure 32. Pastiche of post-study survey results.

## METHODS OF ANALYSIS

“Great results cannot be achieved at once;  
and we must be satisfied to advance in life as we walk, step by step.”

~Samuel Smiles

Bogdan and Biklen (2002) indicate that analysis takes place when an educator arranges data in order to make sense, meaning, and discovery of the important aspects of one’s research to other educators. To determine the results of using writing portfolios in my classroom, I began my data analysis process by dissecting my field log notes, which provided a first hand account of student behaviors and experiences in my classroom. Hendricks (2009) mentions that meaningful data analysis occurs as the study takes place, not just at the conclusion of data collection. Taking such advice, I regularly wrote analytic memos on my field log notes, conference notes, student reflections, and student work. I noted trends, similarities, and differences in these pieces of data, redirecting my study’s path when necessary. Holly, Arhar, and Kasten (2001) suggest this process as a tool to see “patterns of behavior in words, key ideas, and events” (p. 187).

Additionally, I cited figurative language throughout my field log notes, completing an analytic memo. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) state, “Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action” (p. 3). By completing this process, I interpreted student and teacher behavior through

identifying and analyzing the literal and implied meanings of the student and teacher talk within my classroom.

I configured reflective memos based on the philosophies of Dewey (1997), Freire (2003), Vygotsky (1978), and Delpit and Dowdy (2002), creating the opportunity for me to view my data through a multiplicity of lenses. In connecting with Dewey's (1997) educational philosophy, I cited relevant data that showed I developed a positive and meaningful learning experience for my students. Freire (2003) stressed the importance of students being active learners, a process that essentially created choice and flexibility for students in generating their writing portfolios. Vygotsky (1978) led me to realize that learning takes place within each student's zone of proximal development, providing a clear framework for the individualized instruction given during student and teacher conferences. Delpit and Dowdy (2002) stressed the power of discourse in the classroom. They discussed the importance of listening to students and continually being aware of what occurs in their lives. Delpit states, "Without that knowledge it is difficult to connect the curriculum to anything students find meaningful" (p. 43). Weaving student choice throughout my study allowed my students to find personal connections in their writing, which motivated them to learn.

Next, I completed a mid-study data analysis, where I identified my research question, posed sub-questions that directly related to my research question, and compiled a chronological roster of my observational field log data.

Through these processes, I identified individual insights gleaned throughout my researcher log, including field log entries, student assignments, surveys, and conference notes. I also thought about what I did not yet know, as suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (2002), and developed a plan for the remainder of my study.

In addition to my analytic memos, I completed a PMI chart for individual student reflections, including conference questions, peer reflections, and the introductory reflective letter for the final portfolio. I analyzed student reflective processes throughout the study, utilizing the PMI chart to note changes in student reflections as more instruction occurred, examining whether students took ownership of their learning and felt motivated as writers. These charts allowed me to compare student reflections over time, identifying change in attitude, tone, and commitment to writing.

In looking deeper at student work, I also charted student grades in each of the writing assessments, noting specific scores in each rubric criterion, along with the overall assessment grade. I collected written feedback I provided for each student on the final assessment, student reflections, and the final portfolio. I cited trends in the data, recognizing if I provided consistent or unique feedback to specific students, and compared my feedback over the course of the study. I also looked to see the similarities in the feedback I wrote to the feedback students gave themselves as they reflected on their drafts through their reflection sheets.

In telling my classroom story, I developed several analysis forms. I created an individual pastiche for the pre-, mid-, and post-study surveys. Ely (2007) describes a pastiche as a visual juxtaposition of data “built to provide a meaningful whole” (p. 586). Creating each pastiche allowed me to compare and relate student responses to each of the questions on the surveys and tell the story of my students’ view of the study through one visualization. Additionally, I compared student survey data to my field log data and student work, noting trends in similarities and differences as my writing units progressed.

Also woven in my story, I generated layered stories, dramatizations, and anecdotes. Ely et al. (1997) note that narrative forms such as these are a “method of inquiry and a way of knowing—a discovery and analysis” (p. 64). I utilized these forms to analyze my data, comparing my view of student achievement in my field log notes, to those verbal reactions of students from conference notes and student work. I completed participant checks with my students, reading over my narrative forms with them, in order to assure validity in my interpretation.

### ***Codes, Bins, and Themes***

Within the process of collecting my data, I regularly coded my researcher log and student work. Bogdan and Biklen (2002) describe creating codes as rereading the researcher log and identifying similar ideas in data, such as “certain words, phrases, patterns of behavior, subjects’ ways of thinking, and events” (p. 161). Through this process, I created a word or short phrase to represent these

pieces of data. After generating my codes, I developed a coding index, where I organized codes that connected to one another in alphabetical order. I then took my codes and began to organize them in bins, in “search for important patterns, themes, and perhaps issues that seem to reach to the heart of those meanings” (Ely et al., 1997, p. 204). I generated a graphic organizer (see Figure 33) to illustrate the relationship of my codes and bins, creating a visualization in the format of a house, showing how each specific bin and the codes within the bin relate to one another in “constructing” writing portfolios in the classroom.

From there, I created a theme statement for each bin, taking the advice of Ely et al. (1997), summarizing how the codes in each bin relate:

1. In order to create a comfortable environment that supports the use of writing portfolios, teachers must maintain a careful balance between choice and structure, include motivation for student learning, and provide clear expectations in the classroom.
2. Writing portfolios in a writing workshop format increase student motivation and confidence.
3. Through the use of writing portfolios, students take ownership of their learning by asking each other and their teacher clarifying questions, taking on the role of a teacher for other students, utilizing their previous knowledge and experiences, regularly collaborating with each other to

learn, and participating in regular reflection on their personal achievements.

4. In order for students to collaborate successfully, they must be grouped accordingly, have a strong group dynamic, take on specific roles, and be given the opportunity to have leadership roles in those groups.
5. Through a writing portfolio environment, students develop a trust and respect in the classroom teacher, valuing the feedback provided.
6. Teachers foster student learning in writing portfolios when they utilize both independent and collaborative work, model and scaffold writing strategies through teacher, student, and published texts, utilize students' multiple intelligences to generate lessons, and work one-on-one with students to meet individual student needs.
7. A teacher must realize the impact that students' perceptions, such as the negative perceptions of reflections, writing, English class, and making revisions, along with the focus on grades, lack of confidence, and lack of motivation students developed and acquired through previous experiences in the writing process, will have on generating writing portfolios in the classroom.
8. Through teaching strategies in writing portfolios in writing workshop, teachers gain insight into students' thinking, seeing the positive effects of critical feedback on students' writing; therefore, teachers become role

models for students, connecting with students and building a positive learning relationship.

9. Students exhibit creativity, positive interaction, volunteer in class, work beyond expectations, and use their time well when generating writing portfolios.

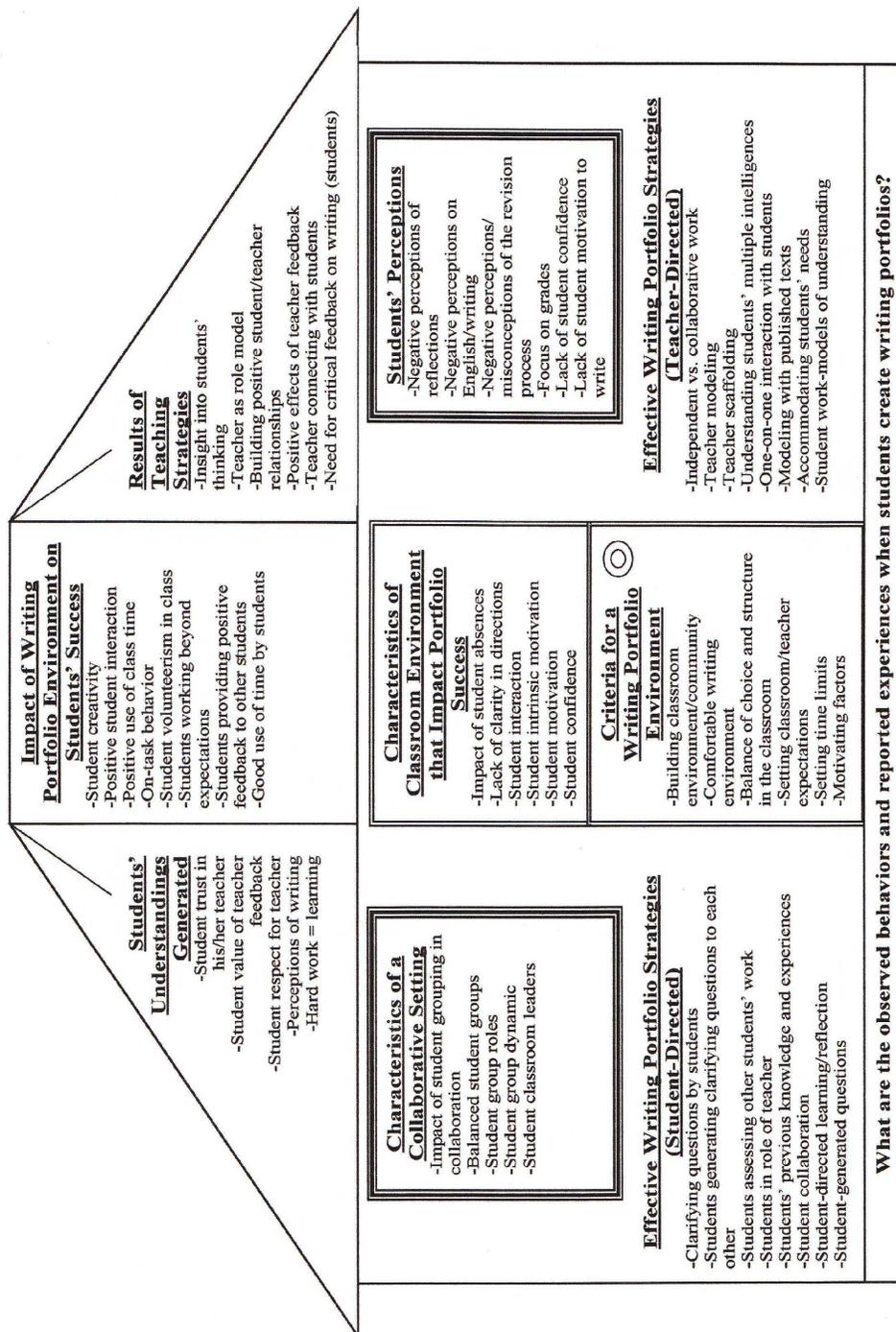


Figure 33. Graphic organizer of codes and bins.

## FINDINGS

“Learning is a treasure that will follow its owner everywhere.”

~Chinese Proverb

### Criteria for a Writing Portfolio Environment

*In order to create a comfortable environment that supports the use of writing portfolios, teachers must maintain a careful balance between choice and structure, include motivation for student learning, and provide clear expectations in the classroom.*

Student choice quickly became a *doorway* for success in my learning community, and one that I utilized quite frequently to motivate and drive students to learn and take chances in their experiences in my classroom. I generated several avenues of choice while students created their writing portfolios. As I embarked on this journey with students, I soon realized that in order for them to make meaningful choices in their learning, choice needed to be balanced with direct instruction and modeling from the teacher on how to make responsible choices that lead to meaningful learning. From these experiences, students became motivated to continue to work hard and improve their writing. Sustain and Lovell (2000), Burke (2005), and Hebert (2001) also suggest that portfolios allow students to reach individual learning goals, make choices in how to direct that learning, and lead their learning experiences. Hebert (2001) and Paulson et al. (1991) make the point that when teachers and students work together as a team

through the portfolio process, student and curricular goals can be achieved; therefore, students know the expectations for learning and feel motivation to meet the expectations they designed for themselves. Working as a team with my students, I gained great insight on how student choice can motivate students to write when I work as a partner in learning to guide them through their classroom experiences.

To infuse a balance of choice and structure in the classroom, students generated writing goals at the beginning of the study. They reflected regularly on these goals in connection to pieces they placed in their final writing portfolio. Students outlined a deadline for achieving their goals. As their teacher, I met regularly in informal and formal conferences, held class mini lessons on writing, and worked diligently to model writing strategies that best guided students to meet their goals. Students chose their own learning path, and as the expert in writing, I provided the structure for them to succeed. In their introductory reflective letters, students wrote about their journey to reach their goals and identified reasons why they may not have achieved them by the mid-point in our school year. In connection, Oginsky's (2003) study on goal-oriented learning also indicated that when students develop their own goals, they become motivated to learn and achieve.

Students showed evidence of this from their goal sheets and introductory reflective letters. Isaac set a goal at the beginning of the process to improve his

introductions. He stated in his introductory reflective letter, “I think I have grown because you helped me with my essays to make me a better writer. I think my strengths are my introductions. It used to be a weakness but now I can write a strong catchy intro.” Isaac met his goals because of the valuable feedback he received in conferences through teacher modeling and scaffolding.

Additionally, Aaron’s main goal this year was to get an interest back in his writing. He described in his introductory reflective letter that his summer reading essay, the baseline writing piece, motivated him right from the start because he wrote about a book he enjoyed. Aaron’s expression in his introductory reflective letter again recognizes the importance of providing student choice in topic as a way to motivate students to write and meet their goals.

Finally, Candace also pointed out in her introductory reflective letter, “The goals I created at the beginning of the year guided me through my learning because it helped me realize what I had to work on.” She further discussed in her letter about her goals for improving her grammar and summarizing her thoughts, and how the writing activities we completed in class helped her to meet those goals. Goals here worked for Candace as a way to provide a path for learning that became accessible through the teaching strategies I provided through conferences and mini lessons.

As choice in writing topic motivated Aaron to meet his writing goals, it motivated other students as well. I first guided students to develop writing

territories and a collage to brainstorm topics for each of the writing units.

Through these exercises, I noted choice through topic selection as a motivating criterion for student learning because students could directly relate to the topic they wrote about. Oginsky (2003) also experienced this in the classroom, realizing that when students select their own topics, they are intrinsically motivated to complete assignments.

After the first round of conferences, students expressed they liked writing about topics that they found interest in and familiarity with, as outlined in the notes taken on the first round of conferences. Students stated similar feelings in the mid-study survey pastiche, such as, “I think we are already becoming better writers because we get to write about topics that WE choose, which makes us more eager to write” and comments on the writing portfolio, such as, “I like it because we pick what we write about.”

For students who struggled with picking topics, I continued to scaffold student learning by providing frameworks for choice. The writing territories and collage, free write sessions, and specific examples of topic starters, as I did for both the express and reflect and the inform and explain essays, provided a support that allowed me to meet students’ needs. This became evident in my work with Isaac, who stated, “I don’t know what to write about,” after we began our first free write session for the express and reflect essay. Working together, looking over his writing territories and collage, I asked him some guiding questions to

lead him to topic selection. From there, he finally started to write diligently in his own notebook. Providing him a structure of choice in his zone of proximal development motivated him to succeed in this lesson. As Vygotsky (1978) indicates,

But if we ignore the child's needs, and the incentives which are effective in getting him to act, we will never be able to understand his advance from one developmental stage to the next, because every advance is connected with the marked change in motives, inclinations, and incentives. (p. 92)

As students utilized their writing territories and collage to brainstorm ideas for writing assignments, they demonstrated motivation to discuss and complete the assignments, such as when students shared their ideas on their express and reflect essays during the free write sessions and wrote their rough drafts on time for the following class. Also, because students worked on topics they picked, students chose to work on their assignments even when they did not have to do so. This occurred when several students chose to work on their inform and explain essays while I showed the movie *To Kill a Mockingbird* in class, and also when Leslie worked on the same essay at home before it was due. I regularly reflected on how student choice in topic motivated students to revise their work and to use their time wisely in class.

### **Characteristics of Classroom Environment that Impact Portfolio Success**

*Writing portfolios in a writing workshop setting increase student confidence and motivation.*

Through my experience with writing portfolios, I quickly discovered that when students feel confident to make changes to their writing and to complete writing tasks, they become motivated to revise and edit their work. One way students found motivation in this experience was through picking their own topics for their writing assignments and designing the final writing portfolio. As students began generating their writing assignments for their portfolios, I realized I needed to develop a different type of motivation and confidence in each student for the revision process. Students explained that their previous experiences with writing generally included a process that involved writing a rough copy, editing it, and then handing it in for a grade. Revision was a new concept that needed to be modeled and described to students step-by-step in order to build student confidence through this new experience.

Additionally, many students expressed they were not confident in their writing ability, as identified in their pre-study survey results. Therefore, not only was it necessary to build student confidence in writing in general, but it was also important to motivate them to try something new in the writing process that was meaningful and worthwhile. As Vygotsky (1978) states,

...writing should be meaningful for children, that an intrinsic need should be aroused in them, and that writing should be incorporated into a task that is necessary and relevant for life. Only then can we be certain that it will develop not as a matter of hand and finger habits but as a really new and complex form of speech. (p. 118)

It was a primary objective for me as their teacher, to not just teach writing as a form of generating letters on a piece of paper, but to motivate students to truly develop the meaning and expression of their own thoughts and ideas. Using writing portfolios in my classroom created this experience for my students.

Isaac identified himself as a reluctant writer at the beginning of this study. Even with the support systems of writing territories and the collage to guide him through brainstorming, he still struggled with having confidence to begin his writing assignments, specifically during our free write sessions. I believed early on that Isaac was a capable writer, filled with ideas and experiences that could complete a novel. It was my job as his educator to motivate him to want to tell his story. Through the scaffolding that occurred when Isaac and I met in conferences, Isaac developed the ability by the end of the study to work through the period on his own, making the necessary revisions he needed to in order to improve his writing. As we met in his last conference session, we identified together his weakness and lack of confidence in being specific in his writing. After modeling some helpful strategies, and working with Isaac to improve his

details by incorporating his previous knowledge, he was sent to work by himself. At the end of the period, he asked me to look at his work again, as I responded to him, “Wow! Isaac, you have achieved a lot today, and you made some great improvements in organizing and explaining yourself in this letter.”

“Thanks, I was in the zone!” Isaac responded.

As Vygotsky (1978) stresses, in order for students to learn, they need to be taught in their own zone of proximal development. I worked with Isaac through conferencing, scaffolding with his previous knowledge to build his confidence to improve his writing and motivate him to work hard in order for him to achieve his writing goals. Even as the study ended, he eagerly showed me his portfolio for feedback, demonstrating he developed confidence in knowing that he had met the essay requirements and was motivated to complete the assignment. Isaac’s motivation and confidence clearly grew as a result of my model of the portfolio assessment. Klinger and Nelson’s (1996) study yielded similar results, noting that when students find motivation in what they do, their confidence to take chances in their writing increases.

Freire (2003) points out, “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, and hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p. 72). This revelation became quite true for me as I explored uncharted territory with my students in the revision process. I realized early on when embarking on this study

I wanted my students' learning experiences to be meaningful and worthwhile—no longer was I to just give them the answers and let them continue to play the role of “student.” I found it important to require my students to wrestle with their writing—to discover the benefits of careful revision and rereading a document for structure and purpose. Students, such as Erica and Quintin, struggled with the revision process. Through the express and reflect essay, I developed a layered story that described the struggles Erica had with revision, as she vocalized her content with her essay construction at the first draft and did not comprehend why revision was necessary, despite her mismatched organization and ideas. Quintin also displayed a lack of confidence during the inform and explain essay, as he overheard my conference sessions with other students, crumpled up his paper, and became frustrated with the revision process. After meeting with each student during conferences and during the writing process, Erica excitedly shared her work with me and gained valuable feedback to her writing, illustrating her motivation to work hard and confidence to do well in her writing. This feeling of confidence and motivation continued as our work progressed. I specifically recall working with her while we put the final portfolio together. During this time, she asked me to come to her desk to look over the items she chose for her final portfolio project. I noted in my observations that she wanted clarification that the items she would put in her portfolio would show her overall learning. Through our conversation, I reflected that she genuinely seemed into the process and

wanted my feedback—she had discovered motivation and confidence in the writing portfolio process. Quintin demonstrated the same, stating, “I just had to start over,” and “Yeah, it wasn’t so bad,” as we discussed the revision process he experienced for the first time. Hebert (2001) noted that such changes would occur in students as they developed confidence to assess their own strengths and weaknesses, reaching out for advice when needed.

Both Erica and Quintin realized the benefits of their labor after completing their respective writing processes, discovering it was worthwhile to complete the changes. I provided them a structure to motivate them to gain the confidence necessary to meet their needs. Working with students individually and having students find meaning in their writing became key characteristics of my classroom to inspire students to express these feelings at the end of our first writing experience. Students directed their learning and knew exactly where to get the advice and guidance they needed to boost their motivation and confidence when necessary.

My particular experience with writing portfolios fell during the common cold and flu season. With the outbreak of swine flu, it was not uncommon for several students to be absent during one class period. I quickly realized that student absences would play a direct affect on the confidence my students would have to complete assignments, and how missing specific experiences in my classroom might directly influence the outcomes of those students’ portfolios. I

soon discovered that having a strong support system in place, such as positive peer and teacher relationships, offered the support necessary for each student to succeed. This became particularly evident in my experiences with Candace and Erica, who soon became confidants to each other in their learning experiences. I often observed both Candace and Erica explaining missed assignments to one another, providing any examples and explanations needed to help them succeed and gain confidence to complete the assignments. My meetings with each student in conferences and informal discussions reiterated their peer conversations, as I clarified any questions necessary.

#### **Effective Writing Portfolio Strategies: Student-Directed**

*Through the use of portfolios, students take ownership of their learning by asking each other and their teacher clarifying questions, taking on the role of a teacher for other students, utilizing their previous knowledge and experiences, regularly collaborating with each other to learn, and participating in regular reflection on their personal achievements.*

In portfolios, students become designers of their own learning, creating a *foundation* for their learning. This became evident as students explored a writing workshop process of learning to generate a writing portfolio. Hebert (2001) mentions that providing strategies that work best for students to learn effectively that require them to guide their learning allows students to take ownership of their

learning. The strategies I included in my writing portfolio process did just that for many of my students.

As students guided their own learning, they developed questions and reflective responses to questions during class lessons and conferences. One experience where this became evident was during the free write sessions for the inform and explain essay. Students worked within small groups, developing questions and comments for each other's topics that would later be part of the research process for each student. I noted particularly in this collaboration how George and Bianca's group conversation led Bianca to a better topic choice for her. This group collaboration, through questioning, allowed Bianca motivation and support to find a topic she was passionate about.

Additionally, students felt comfortable approaching me, asking clarifying questions about tasks and assignments. I examined this while students compiled their final portfolios for my assessment. During this time, I worked with Candace, as she initiated questions about how she could improve her express and reflect essay. Through our collaboration, she was able to advance her essay, even beyond what she had completed for her final copy, to be in place for the final portfolio. Pilcher (2001) points to this very result as writing portfolios fuse instruction and assessment for both the teacher and the student to see how learning achievement develops over time.

As part of my writing experiences for my students, I decided to infuse the peer reflection process. This was not to be confused with what students had experienced in the past—peer editing, but rather a method of reflection from another’s point of view, rather than just my own, of what the reader liked or did not like in the essay. Donovan et al. (2002), Hebert (2001), McCann (2000), Helton (1994), and Liu (2005) all note the importance of peer conferencing in the writing process, indicating that this process provides another means of confirmation that the student is learning and provides feedback on what the student can improve upon. Results from the mid-study survey indicated that some students did not see the benefits of peer conferences because they were not confident other students gave them worthwhile advice. They also felt that their peers just filled out the forms to get them done. I realized students had not seen my vision of this collaborative process and it did not have the initial benefits I hoped it would for my students. By re-modeling the strategy and stressing to students that the peer conferences should only provide general feedback on the essay’s structure, readability, and form, and not specific strategies for revising and editing, students held peer conferences without the extra scaffolding provided by the reflection sheet by the end of the study. For example, I observed Bianca and Leslie discussing the reflection process, reading over each other’s reflections for clarity and completeness. I noted Erica and Candace working together, as Candace guided Erica through some aspects of the final portfolio she missed due

to absences, providing her feedback on whether or not she completed the introductory letter correctly, trying to comfort her as she felt frustrated with being behind.

Further, students took ownership of their learning by becoming their own “educator.” This process began with the ideas mini lesson where students assessed a variety of different essays for their ideas based off a six-point scale. Taking this new skill, students assessed their own work, scoring their express and reflect essays. Through this experience, students became equipped to answer reflective questions about their writing, noted the changes they knew were necessary, and sought guidance to do so. This occurred as Isaac, Aaron, and Candace demonstrate in their second round of conferences, as they led their conference sessions by identifying the best part of their essay, what needed to be worked on, and how I as their teacher could help them meet their goals.

Through the rest of the writing units and the final portfolio, students continued to demonstrate ownership of their learning by identifying their strengths and weaknesses, and assessing their own work. Hebert (2001), Burke (2005), and Pilcher (2001) all point out that when assessment and instruction are merged together and occur simultaneously, as in portfolios, students can see how they learn as it occurs. This provides an opportunity for both the student and the teacher working with the student to develop learning experiences that foster continual learning. By the time students completed their introductory reflective

letters, they demonstrated awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, what aspects of this class guided them to better learning, and what aspects of writing they still wanted to improve upon. For instance, Candace explained in her letter how she learned to be a descriptive writer and how she planned to work continually on improving her essays to keep her reader's attention. Candace already planned her next learning step because she examined her work, reflected on what she had learned, and developed a new goal for writing on what she wanted to improve on next. Utilizing what she knew and how she experienced it allowed her to develop a plan for learning that would take her through the rest of the year. This is similar to what Donovan et al. (2002) observed, as students gained valuable insight into what growth took place over a period of time and what new goals should be generated next through their experiences with portfolios.

Students also take ownership of their learning by utilizing their own previous knowledge and experiences to their advantage. This became particularly evident as students made conscious choices about the topics they pursued in each writing unit. One quote stood out in particular, as I explained the inform and explain essay, and prepared students for their free write sessions. Olivia, motivated to write, stated, "This one's going to be good." Olivia chose to pursue a topic on the brand Converse, as she liked wearing this brand of shoes. She

found motivation to use the information she already knew about the brand to research and build an essay about a topic that interested her.

Reflection became a tough sell for my students at the beginning of the study, yet an integral part to the portfolio process. Paulson and Paulson (1990) and Zubizarreta (2004) indicated that reflection allows students to inquire what they have or have not learned; therefore, students discover and analyze how their learning takes place, and develop ownership of their learning experiences. I found these qualities essential for my students to gain. I did not give up easily on convincing my students that reflection was not a waste of time.

When I first presented reflection to my students, Quintin made a remark that resonated for me throughout this study. “Mrs. Binkley, you’ve run out of things for us to do.” I struggled with whether or not my students would find meaning in this portfolio strategy. I reassured myself that students had already reflected effectively—they just did not realize it. They already answered reflective questions to guide their conferences, scored themselves on their rough drafts of the express and reflect essays, and provided reasons why they awarded themselves those scores. I now wanted to make sure all students took the scoring seriously, as I recalled Isaac giving himself a five for ideas because he wanted to make sure he received a good grade.

By the time students completed the mid-study survey, most indicated they found meaning in the reflection process. Students thought about their strengths

and weaknesses and reflected on how they accomplished what they did. Ownership of learning took place for them. I did have some students who still did not see the purpose in reflection, so it was necessary for me to find out why and to continue to model the appropriate reflection process. By the end of the writing portfolio process, my post-study survey results indicated that students found purpose in reflection. Although I did have two students who indicated that the portfolio was not worthwhile to complete, their comments signified they found some value in it by stating, “it helped me a lot” and “it is neat to see how I have improved with my writing.”

### **Characteristics of a Collaborative Setting**

*In order for students to collaborate successfully, they must be grouped accordingly, have a strong group dynamic, take on specific roles, and be given the opportunity to have leadership roles in those groups.*

Relatively early on in the study, I realized how important building a collaborative classroom community would be on students’ success. Students would need to trust one another to evaluate each other’s work, along with myself as their educator leading them through their learning journey. Paulson and Paulson (1990) state that student interaction and collaboration, both with other students and the teacher, reflecting, assessing, and guiding each other through the portfolio creation process, are key criteria to developing portfolios in the classroom. Building classroom collaboration was a *window* of opportunity for

students to grow and learn as a community. This process began for me as students worked through the creative writing exercise, where students developed a Freytag's Pyramid that outlined the ingredients of a short story. I observed students working with one another, collaborating ideas and providing feedback. This exercise established that it was necessary for all students to respect one another's ideas and use their time wisely while within a group. I guided students to take on roles within those groups that worked best for them. Students who excelled at handwriting quickly became the recorders of their groups. Students who enjoyed drawing completed the illustrations for the story. I saw this collaboration transpire into the baseline writing piece, as Leslie and Bianca continued to collaborate and brainstorm successfully for their individual essays. Throughout the rest of the study, students continued to collaborate with one another in mini lessons, peer conferences, and as they worked together to share their free writes and drafts of writing. As my writing community formed, I realized through these collaborations it was important for students to know how to work with one another, ask each other questions, and respond to one another respectfully.

### **Students' Understandings Generated**

*Through a writing portfolio environment, students develop a trust and respect in the classroom teacher, valuing the feedback provided.*

Having a teacher whom students can depend upon as a facilitator of their learning quickly became a criterion that *structured* the success of many of the student-teacher interactions I had on a daily basis, as I provided feedback on student work. Students received feedback in a variety of ways throughout this study. One of the methods utilized was regular conferencing. For each writing unit, I made it a point to sit down and meet with students individually to discuss any of their needs in developing their written drafts. Brennan Jenkins (1996) points out that conferences allow students to take pride in their work and direct their own learning choices. I also found it important for students to realize through these conferences, and any other interaction I had with students, that I was not there to write their essays for them. I wanted students to discover the writing experience themselves, leading their learning by deciding what they wanted to revise. I instead chose to work as a guide to provide students the necessary skills to become the writers I believed they could become. As Friere (2003) states, "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (p. 72).

I began to develop a trusting relationship with my students as I explored my own personal writing territories and collage with them. It became important for me to develop a personal connection with each of my students so that when I began my individual conference sessions with them, they would see me as an

approachable individual and one full of life experiences similar or connected to their own. I saw immediately that students found interest in discovering who I was as I reflected on the teacher modeling experience.

From this, I took every chance I could to make myself approachable. I worked with individual groups during the Freytag's Pyramid activity, guided students through their free write exercises, and continued to provide positive feedback to my students. Positive and meaningful feedback became the crux to building a trusting relationship with my students. One way that I ensured this would occur was through my written feedback on students' essays. I recall one particular reflection Ross wrote. "I also like how the teacher commented on my letter, 'Ross, your organization is great.' That comment made me proud." Providing students with uplifting statements, such as this one, allowed me to show students that they were great writers, and that I was there to help them to continue to grow.

As our writing experiences progressed, I began meeting in one-on-one conferences with students on a regular basis. My first conference session with Aaron stood out to me as it defined the importance of providing opportunities to build a trusting relationship with my students. Aaron anticipated meeting with me, and as the bell rang for the period to end, he showed disappointment that I would not be able to meet with him until the next class. Instead, I asked him to stay beyond the period, and his excitement returned. As we met, I encouraged

Aaron to be honest. Because of the trust Aaron and I developed, he was able to express his annoyance with past school writing experiences. This trust, I learned, would lead to meaningful interactions with Aaron, as he was able to get his interest back in writing through choice in topic and meet his writing goals. Without this trust, Aaron might not have met his goals this year.

### **Effective Writing Portfolio Strategies: Teacher-Directed**

*Teachers foster student learning in writing portfolios when they utilize both independent and collaborative work, model and scaffold writing strategies through teacher, student, and published texts, utilize students' multiple intelligences to generate lessons, and work one-on-one with students to meet individual student needs.*

A writing workshop format became a natural, instructional design while students' created portfolios and the written items in them. This format provided a *foundation* for writing portfolio success. I quickly discovered that by utilizing a writing workshop in my classroom, I gained a better insight into students' learning and each individual student's needs. Calfee (1994) agrees the portfolio creation process provides a way for students to work in a cooperative environment that includes having students prepare portfolios over a period of time, gaining feedback and support from others, and working within valuable opportunities to revise and draft the writing submitted in the final portfolio. By setting the

classroom up in this format, Calfee saw great gains in student learning. This was no different in my classroom.

As Dewey (1997) proposed, teachers need to create educative experiences in the classroom in order for students to find purpose and meaning in what they emerge themselves in. I strived to do this for my students, and saw results. Students experienced a variety of opportunities to work individually and collaboratively, which met students' needs. After exploring students' multiple intelligence survey results, I realized the importance of this as a necessary step for students' success in order for them to find an environment that met their specific needs. Burke et al. (2002) point out that portfolios allow educators to meet each student's individual needs as a learner. During writing workshop, I observed students working collaboratively with each other when they needed to and individually when they needed to concentrate on their writing. For instance, I recall Isaac's comment when we created the introductory reflective letter. He stated, "I was in the zone." Isaac sought collaborative help for his letter through our conference session. Afterwards, he sat and worked independently, while other students around him collaborated and worked at their own pace. As Burke (2005) noted, portfolios allow students to work on a path of learning that is meaningful to them. This format occurred frequently for other students in my study, as the writing workshop structure in the express and reflect essay, inform

and explain essay, resume, and the introductory reflective letter with the portfolio all allowed each student to work at a self-selected pace.

Modeling and scaffolding student learning occurred frequently throughout the writing process. I conducted a variety of mini lessons on writing strategies, which included creating brainstorming strategies, writing leads, and adding description and details. Through these mini lessons, I often explored the writing experience with students and “walked in my students’ shoes,” as I showed them what I experienced as a writer through speaking aloud my inner thoughts. I recall working particularly with Danielle for the imagery mini lesson, as we worked together to find a way to take the thoughts from her head and describe them on a piece of paper. Students further indicated in their post-study survey responses that teacher modeling and individualized instruction guided them to make important educative choices to increase their learning experiences.

Additionally, these activities took place in conferences. Freire (2003) states that open dialogue is necessary between students and teachers. Instead of dictators of learning, teachers should foster student growth by facilitating experiences that allow students to grow and discover their own abilities; therefore, students’ needs are met. Conferences provided a great means of communication and instruction between the student and me. I quickly found that I learned just as much from my students in these conference sessions as they learned from me. Resnick (as cited in Flynn & King, 1993) indicated that such results would occur,

suggesting that conferences provide an opportunity for students to experience teacher modeling of effective writing strategies.

As I reviewed my conference sessions with the three students I highlighted, it became apparent that Isaac, Aaron, and Candace were all unique students with individual learning needs. No two conference sessions were alike among any of these students and the rest of my class. For instance, in my third round of conferences during the inform and explain essay, I discussed descriptive language with Isaac, talked about sentence structures with Aaron, and modeled writing an effective lead with Candace. I met each student's individual needs through conferences and provided writing strategies that appealed to his or her particular learning ability. As Freire (2003) states about the student-teacher relationship,

They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on 'authority' are no longer valid; in order to function, authority *must be on the side* of freedom, not *against* it. Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are 'owned' by the teacher. (p. 80)

I saw the importance of breaking the barrier of the ideal of a teacher in role as dictator of learning in order to create a supportive and collaborative

relationship with students that allowed conferences to succeed. In essence, I became a partner in learning with each of my students.

### **Students' Perceptions**

*A teacher must realize the impact that students' perceptions, such as the negative perceptions of reflections, writing, English class, and making revisions, along with the focus on grades, lack of confidence, and lack of motivation students have developed and acquired through previous experiences in the writing process, will have on generating writing portfolios in the classroom.*

As Vygotsky (1978) points out, "Instead of being founded on the needs of children as they naturally develop and on their own activity, writing is given to them from without, from the teacher's hands" (p. 105). My students early on *opened a window of understanding* that their earlier writing experiences differed from what writing portfolios provided. Many students, as indicated in their pre-study survey results, focused heavily on the idea that revision in writing was all about correcting one's "mistakes" or grammatical errors. Students walked into my classroom with little knowledge of the revision process, a key component to the purpose of portfolios, as they blend assessment and instruction together. Additionally, although many students felt they were good writers, several indicated in their pre-study survey results that they were not, making comments such as, "No, because all the writing pieces when I get them back even when I try hard I still fail." This indicated to me that I needed to put a support system in

place to help guide students to gain confidence in their writing through generating a portfolio.

Additionally, my classroom consisted of many students who only concentrated on their final grades, not recognizing the importance of the learning process as a whole. By incorporating the teaching strategies, such as teacher modeling and scaffolding, students no longer held their only focus on the final grade, but saw value in the learning experiences they completed. This change became evident from comparing the pre-, mid-, and post-study survey responses, along with students' comments in student and teacher conferences. Overall, students began to reveal the importance of making changes in their essays in order for them to be the best they could be, as many students sought advice from me as their educator and from their peers.

I remained aware of the lack of student confidence throughout the writing portfolio process as well. I recorded early on in my study that Isaac stood out to me as a reluctant learner. He lacked the confidence and notion that he possessed the ability to be a good writer, even though the capabilities were all there. As I created Isaac's first-person narrative during the resume writing process, I realized that just the physical placement of Isaac could boost his confidence and motivation to learn. When motivated, Isaac willingly asked me questions because he knew I would help guide him to be successful. Placing his seat near my desk provided him the opportunity to receive answers to the questions he had without

the knowledge of his peers. Students occasionally gave him a hard time because he asked so many questions. Just by placing his desk near my location, I met Isaac's needs immediately without any extra, unwanted attention on him.

### **Results of Teaching Strategies**

*Through teaching strategies in writing portfolios in writing workshop, teachers gain insight into students' thinking, seeing the positive effects of critical feedback on students' writing; therefore, teachers become role models for students, connecting with students and building a positive learning relationship.*

Utilizing writing portfolios in my classroom allowed me to see a part of my students that I never knew wholly before. I saw their thought processes, as they learned, instead of just a snapshot of their writing ability at the end of the writing experience. Meeting regularly with my students in conferences further allowed me to witness them develop as writers in a writing workshop; I felt connected to them as individuals and grew closer to this class as a whole more than any other class that I taught before. I became familiar with my students' personalities, needs, struggles, and strengths. The teaching strategies utilized in writing portfolios allowed me to observe the *height of possibility* for learning in my students. As Biondi (2001) concurs, "I learned more about the 'whole child' who I was teaching" through writing portfolios (p.19).

One particular aspect of the portfolio process that gave me great insight to my students' thinking was their introductory reflective letters. As I examined

Isaac, Aaron, and Candace's letters, I realized the positive effects of my feedback in formal and informal conferences had on their writing experiences. As a teacher, I somewhat forget that students genuinely have feelings about the work they complete. It is not just an assignment—it is a piece of them that shows their ability. I now know through this letter assignment that Isaac plans to continue to work on descriptive writing next year and hopes to improve the details he puts in the body of his papers. I would have never known that Aaron wanted to really become an inspiring writer if it was not for his introductory reflective letter. Candace also gave insight into what she wants to do in the future, and how learning new things and taking notes on new topics is something she truly enjoys. Now knowing these aspects of my students gives me great power as their educator to create learning experiences that are meaningful and worthwhile to each and every one of them.

Conferences also provided an opportunity for me to gain an understanding of my students' learning, and allowed me to provide positive and meaningful feedback to them that would allow them to grow as writers. I recall specifically my last conference session with Aaron, as he approached me with his struggle to understand a particular requirement for his introductory reflective letter. After modeling, re-explaining, and some positive feedback, he left, able to explain what he did not previously know and armed with a positive attitude to continue his writing. Students, such as Aaron, no longer felt comfortable just handing in a

draft without such critical feedback. They wanted to be successful, showing me that they learned how to create an effective piece of writing.

### **Impact of Writing Portfolio Environment on Students' Success**

*Students exhibit creativity, show positive interaction, volunteer in class, work beyond expectations, and use their time well when generating writing portfolios.*

Choice of Topic → Motivation to Learn → Ownership of Learning → Learning

The writing portfolio for me generated a powerful impact on student success in the classroom. I watched as many reluctant writers, and students who were not interested in the revision process, transform into students who felt they could always improve and *reach beyond* their goals. They certainly excelled beyond mine.

Students at this particular age often view themselves as uncreative. As indicated in the pre-study survey results, most students viewed themselves as poor writers because they believed they did not have the skills to help improve their writing. They further indicated that they were hard working and willing to try their best, but there was a missing link. I believe portfolios provided that missing link for many of my students. As they indicated in the pre-study surveys, students knew that revision meant making sure to have a finalized copy, what qualities a good writer has, and what qualities make good writing, but were unsure how to utilize these understandings to improve their own writing skills.

It started with creativity. I learned quickly that the more creative students could be in their writing, the more motivated they were to learn. Student choice became the driving force of creativity in my classroom. Sustain and Lovell (2000) state, “With portfolios, students can put their own spin on standards, exceed expectations, adjust a curriculum to fit their interests, and then show us how they accomplish these goals” (p. XV). As Aaron pointed out in his introductory reflective letter, the informative essay topic he chose was snowboarding. This was a topic that interested him, and he even stated, “I like the topic I’m writing about so I am bound to do good.” With a choice of topic for his writing at his fingertips, he found motivation to write the piece. He further described how he met all the criteria for the rubric and how strong his voice was throughout the essay. Through these realizations, he took ownership of the piece, revised throughout the writing workshop process with guidance and support in his conference meetings and peer collaborations in a timely manner, and learned how to write an effective informative essay. Dewey (1997) indicates that students develop independent thinking when they pursue their own learning interests. This is also suggested by Biondi (2001), as she discovered that forms of authentic assessment, such as portfolios, motivated her students because the process was creative, fun, and gave a chance for her students to be unique and active participants in the assessment process. This certainly became the case for Aaron and many other students in my classroom as well.

As my study ended, what students learned became evident from their post-study survey results. Each student walked away with new skills and knowledge pertinent to them as individuals. No other experience in my classroom before yielded such quality results, and I knew portfolios came to stay. As Dewey (1997) states, “Everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had.” Writing portfolios in my classroom clearly produced a quality learning experience unlike any other I created before in writing instruction.

## THE NEXT ACT

“To be on a quest is nothing more or less  
than to become an asker of questions.”

~Sam Keen

I think anyone who embarks upon a research journey, such as this one, expects to walk away with answers—not more questions. Yet, as I continue to reflect on this experience with my students, all I can think of are new questions. What would happen if my students created a reading portfolio? What about including both reading and writing? What other effective practices exist that foster a collaborative classroom community? How about the editing process? What strategies could I include to incorporate grammatical skills into the writing workshop that would better equip students at their final stages of the writing process? I strive to continue to work at my teacher modeling processes, finding the best ways to show students how even I struggle in developing writing. I now realize the importance of working with students in their writing, meeting students’ needs, and the rewarding results of students’ reflective thinking. Every educator has a conscious choice to be either exceptional or mediocre. It is within our own power to decide how we want to touch students’ lives. I do not want to settle for mediocrity. I want to continue to empower myself so that I can empower my students.

As I began to conclude my fifth year of teaching, I knew that I would be at a crossroads. Colleagues expressed in the past what reaching your fifth year means—you are either in it for the long haul or it is time to change careers. This past year has offered me quite a bit of soul searching. Realizing early on in the year that I might not return to my current district was a large factor in determining whether education would continue to be my career path or if I would find a new career goal to follow. After completing this study, I cannot see myself pursuing a career in any field other than education. There is nothing more powerful than having the opportunity everyday to inspire students—to lead them to a fulfilling future. Finding ways to do so effectively has become a passion of mine and one I hope to continue through building a powerful curriculum and utilizing best practices with my students. As I explained, complained, and exclaimed my experiences with this study to my colleagues, I realized how powerful teacher collaboration and support can be. Perhaps this journey has led me to realize my own learning path, as I begin to seek the next steps I may take to work with professional learning communities in building effective curriculum and instruction. I never saw myself as a leader in this field, but now I see a path heading in that direction that has created new goals for myself and has filled me with a rejuvenated sense of excitement of what is yet to come.

*Scene One.* The scene is set, five years later. The same woman with auburn hair now leads professional learning communities through meaningful professional development.

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## Appendix A

September 2, 2009

Dear Principal,

I am completing a Master of Education degree at Moravian College. My courses have enabled me to learn about the most effective teaching methods. One of the requirements of the program is that I conduct a systematic study of my own teaching practices. This semester, I am focusing on writing portfolios. The title of my research is *Writing Portfolios: Where Assessment and Instruction Meet*. My students will benefit from this research by experiencing writing strategies designed to improve student writing.

The focus of this research-based study is to explore how assessment can play an integral role to instructional practices in the classroom. Overall, students will participate in a writing workshop where they will brainstorm, draft, revise, and submit final copies of their writing. Within this workshop, students will develop learning goals for their writing, regularly reflect on their writing and writing practices, and meet frequently in teacher and peer conferences. Students will then submit pieces of writing and accompanying reflections in a final portfolio, which will show their growth in writing and how they met their individual writing goals. The purpose of this study is to discover if writing portfolios motivate students to improve their writing over a period of several assessments. In addition, student feedback through reflections and conferences will help guide me to see if such practices meet the needs of each student to be successful in their writing. This study will take place September 2-December 24, 2009.

I will gather my data and information to support my study through student observations and interviews, in small group and individual conferences, student sample work, and pre-, mid-, and post-questionnaires. The data will be collected and coded, and held in the strictest confidence. No one except me will have access to the data. My research results will be presented using pseudonyms—no one's identity will be used, including all students, teachers, other staff, and the school. Only my name, the names of my sponsoring professors, and Moravian College will appear in the study. In addition, no names will be included on work samples or in any reports of my study. Minor details in students' writing may be altered to ensure confidentiality. I will store the data in a locked cabinet. At the conclusion of the study, the data will be destroyed.

All of the students in my classroom will receive the same instruction and assignments as part of the English curriculum. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and will not impact the student's grade in any way. Any student or parent may withdraw or request their child to withdraw from the study at any time by contacting me to do so. If a student is withdrawn, or the parent or guardian chooses not to allow their child to participate in the study, I will not use any information pertaining to that student in my study and the student will not be penalized in any way. However, students must participate in all regular class activities, including all writing workshop activities.

We welcome questions about this research at any time. If you have any questions or concerns about my study, please feel free to speak with me or e-mail me. My faculty sponsor is Dr. Charlotte Rappe Zales. She can be contacted by phone at 610-625-7958 or by email at [crzales@moravian.edu](mailto:crzales@moravian.edu).

Thank you very much for your support in this classroom research project. If you do not have any questions, please sign and return the attached consent form.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Marcella D. Binkley  
[REDACTED]

---

### CONSENT FORM

I attest that I am the principal of the teacher conducting this research study, that I have read and understand this consent form, and that I have received a copy. Marcella Binkley has my permission to conduct this study.

Principal's Signature : \_\_\_\_\_

Principal's Name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

September 2, 2009

Dear Parent(s) or Guardian(s),

I am completing a Master of Education degree at Moravian College. My courses have enabled me to learn about the most effective teaching methods. One of the requirements of the program is that I conduct a systematic study of my own teaching practices. This semester, I am focusing on writing portfolios. The title of my research is *Writing Portfolios: Where Assessment and Instruction Meet*. My students will benefit from this research by experiencing writing strategies designed to improve student writing.

The focus of this research-based study is to explore how assessment can play an integral role to instructional practices in the classroom. Overall, students will participate in a writing workshop where they will brainstorm, draft, revise, and submit final copies of their writing. Within this workshop, students will develop learning goals for writing, regularly reflect on their writing and writing practices, and meet frequently in teacher and peer conferences. Students will then submit pieces of writing and accompanying reflections in a final portfolio, which will show their growth in writing and how they met their writing goals. The purpose of this study is to discover if writing portfolios motivate students to improve their writing over a period of several assessments. In addition, student feedback through reflections and conferences will help guide me to see if such practices meet the needs of each student to be successful in their writing. This study will take place September 2-December 24, 2009.

I will gather my data and information to support my study through student observations and interviews, in small group and individual conferences, student sample work, and pre-, mid-, and post-questionnaires. The data will be collected and coded, and held in the strictest confidence. No one except me will have access to the data. My research results will be presented using pseudonyms—no one's identity will be used, including all students, teachers, other staff, and the school. Only my name, the names of my sponsoring professors, and Moravian College will appear in the study. In addition, no names will be included on work samples or in any reports of my study. Minor details in students' writing may be altered to ensure confidentiality. I will store the data in a locked cabinet. At the conclusion of the study, the data will be destroyed.

All of the students in my classroom will receive the same instruction and assignments as part of the English curriculum. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and will not impact the student's grade in any way. Any student or parent may withdraw or request their child to withdraw from the study at any time by contacting me to do so. If a student is withdrawn, or the parent or guardian chooses not to allow their child to participate in the study, I will not use any information pertaining to that student in my study and the student will not be penalized in any way. However, students must participate in all regular class activities, including all writing workshop activities.

We welcome questions about this research at any time. Any questions you have about the research or about the process for withdrawing can be directed to me, Marcella Binkley, [REDACTED], or my advisor, Dr. Charlotte Rappe Zales, Education Department, Moravian College, 610-625-7958, [crzales@moravian.edu](mailto:crzales@moravian.edu). Support services can also

be found through our school's principal, [REDACTED], or your child's guidance counselor, [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

If you approve of your child being a participant in my teacher research, please sign and return the attached consent form. Thank you for your continual support in your child's education.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Marcella D. Binkley

---

**CONSENT FORM  
DUE SEPTEMBER 8, 2009**

I understand that Mrs. Binkley will be observing and collecting data as part of her teacher research on improving student-teacher conferences during writing workshops. My child has permission to be a participant in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Name

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Signature

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Student Signature

**Appendix C**

**MORAVIAN COLLEGE**  
**Bethlehem, Pennsylvania**  
*Writing Portfolios*

**Data Collection**  
**Field Log Entry Date:**  
**Description of Lesson:**

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8

Observations: Behaviors/Interactions/Dialogue	Reflection: Impact on Classroom/Hunches/Ideas	Notes and Questions for Future Learning

### Appendix D

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Pieces Discussed: \_\_\_\_\_

Conference Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Conference Topics: \_\_\_\_\_

Conference Notes/Comments:	Teacher Reflection/Thoughts:

Prepare for Next Conference/Student and Teacher Tasks: \_\_\_\_\_

Date Scheduled for Next Conference: \_\_\_\_\_

### INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION SHEET

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

The portfolio piece I am reviewing is called: \_\_\_\_\_

**Reflection starters**

- This was meaningful to me because ...
  - This piece demonstrates my understanding of ...
  - I am proud of this piece because ...
  - I am not satisfied with this piece because ...
  - Something I would like others to notice about this piece ...
- A question I want to pursue as a result of this piece ...
  - This piece demonstrates a challenge for me because ...
  - I have gained insight as a result of this entry because ...
  - I would like to pursue additional learning in this area because ...

**REFLECTION:**

*Teacher Comments/Response:*

*Adapted from Rolheiser, Bower, and Stevahn (2000)*













4. Do you believe you are a good writer or have improved as a writer because of your writing portfolio? Why or why not?

5. Overall, what have you learned from this experience?

**Appendix J****Name:****Date:****Period:****MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES TEST**

Where does your true intelligence lie? This quiz will tell you where you stand and what to do about it. Read each statement. If it expresses some characteristic of yours and sounds true for the most part, jot down a "T." If it does not, mark an "F." If the statement is sometimes true, sometimes false, leave it blank.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ I would rather draw a map than give someone verbal directions.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ I can play (or used to play) a musical instrument.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ I can associate music with my moods.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ I can add or multiply in my head.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ I like to work with calculators and computers.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ I pick up new dance steps fast.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ It is easy for me to say what I think in an argument or debate.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ I enjoy a good lecture, speech or sermon.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ I always know north from south no matter where I am.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ Life seems empty without music.
11. \_\_\_\_\_ I always understand the directions that come with new gadgets or appliances.
12. \_\_\_\_\_ I like to work puzzles and play games.
13. \_\_\_\_\_ Learning to ride a bike (or skates) was easy.

14. \_\_\_\_\_ I am irritated when I hear an argument or statement that sounds illogical.
  15. \_\_\_\_\_ My sense of balance and coordination is good.
  16. \_\_\_\_\_ I often see patterns and relationships between numbers faster and easier than others.
  17. \_\_\_\_\_ I enjoy building models (or sculpting).
  18. \_\_\_\_\_ I am good at finding the fine points of word meanings.
  19. \_\_\_\_\_ I can look at an object one way and see it sideways or backwards just as easily.
  20. \_\_\_\_\_ I often connect a piece of music with some event in my life.
  21. \_\_\_\_\_ I like to work with numbers and figures.
  22. \_\_\_\_\_ Just looking at shapes of buildings and structures is pleasurable to me.
  23. \_\_\_\_\_ I like to hum, whistle and sing in the shower or when I am alone.
  24. \_\_\_\_\_ I am good at athletics.
  25. \_\_\_\_\_ I would like to study the structure and logic of languages.
  26. \_\_\_\_\_ I am usually aware of the expression on my face.
  27. \_\_\_\_\_ I am sensitive to the expressions on other people's faces.
  28. \_\_\_\_\_ I stay "in touch" with my moods. I have no trouble identifying them.
  29. \_\_\_\_\_ I am sensitive to the moods of others.
  30. \_\_\_\_\_ I have a good sense of what others think of me.
-



## Appendix K

**Name:**

**Date:**

**Period:**

### Writing Portfolio

#### What is the purpose of this portfolio?

The creation of this portfolio for our writing unit serves many purposes. First, the portfolio will allow you as a student to see the growth and progress you have made in identifying, analyzing, and creating different writing forms since the beginning of the year to our mid-year point. In addition, it will allow me to assess your understanding of the new skills and knowledge we have explored in that time on writing, by having your progress illustrated in a collection of assignments. Overall, the portfolio will allow both you and me to see your growth throughout your writing, along with develop a congruent understanding of how all three aspects of your learning tie together.

#### What will I put into my portfolio?

Your portfolio will contain a variety of artifacts, including in-class work, homework assignments, journaling, and formal assessment pieces. Below are the types of assignments that will be put into your portfolio, along with the purpose and reason for their inclusion. Again, the overall purpose for all assignments is to show your understanding of how all of these items tie together to demonstrate your knowledge and ability in writing skills and writing development.

- ✓ Goal Sheet
- ✓ Personal Reflections
- ✓ Peer Conference Sheets
- ✓ Student-Teacher Conference Notes and Worksheets
- ✓ Narrative Story (and all drafting materials)
- ✓ Informative Essay (and all drafting materials)
- ✓ Resume (and all drafting materials)
- ✓ Additional Writing Assignments tied to Parts of Speech and Reading Units
- ✓ All grading materials and rubrics for all assignments
- ✓ Student journal
- ✓ Final Reflective Letter



#### How will this affect our class?

The writing portfolio will ultimately guide the writing instruction and lessons in our classroom. In addition, regular conferences will be held between you and I on your writing, which will require you to prepare answers to questions about your writing and portfolio with the assignments at that time. You will also participate in peer reflection conferences and regular reflective journals on your learning experiences in class. There will also be mini lessons conducted based on the feedback you provide in reflections and conferences. Much

of the class will require you to make choices that will ultimately affect your learning: choices in your writing, reflections, creating rubrics, and overall assessment.

**What should I collect in my portfolio?**

It is important at this point that you keep all writing materials in your portfolio until the final portfolio submission before winter break. This includes items from our reading and conventions units as well that include writing. This will ensure that any assignments you want to include will not be lost and you will have all required items present in the final portfolio. You will receive an assignment sheet and rubric once we begin the final submission process of the portfolio near the end of this comprehensive writing assessment. Please feel free to ask any questions or share your concerns about the portfolio process throughout this learning experience.

## Appendix L

Name:

Date:

Period:

### Characterization of Me: Writing Portfolio Collage

Throughout the year, we will create and draft several pieces of writing to improve your writing skills and reflect upon several subjects and themes discussed in class. As a way to monitor your growth and improvement in writing skills, you will be keeping a writing portfolio, which will remain in class until its final submission and then returned to you after assessment.

In order to complete this assignment, you will decorate the front of the writing folder provided with pictures, quotes, and any other favorite items that might represent you as a person and what you feel you are an expert on. These items may be cut from a magazine, hand drawn, or through any other way that allows the items to remain on the folder for the rest of the year. It is important that all of the items you place in your collage represent and reflect an aspect about you as a person. In the future, we will use these items to help guide us in learning the importance of story-telling, structuring a story, writing development prompts, and several other vital writing skills. In addition, this folder will become the cover of your writing portfolio, so you will want to make it appealing to the eye.

Your collage must include at **least 10** "items" that represent or identify characteristics of you as a person or what you are an expert in. Again, be creative and unique in designing your collage. It is encouraged that your folder contains no white space when in its completed form. This assignment is **DUE ON \_\_\_\_\_**. The items in the following checklist need to be fulfilled in order to receive full credit for this assignment.

\_\_\_ 10 items are included in the collage. Each item represents the student's characterization (10 points).

\_\_\_ Writing collage is neatly done and creative. No white space is evident (10 points).

\_\_\_ Writing collage is handed in on time (10 points).

\_\_\_ /30 points total

## Appendix M

**Name:**

**Date:**

**Period:**

### Summer Reading: Informative Letter

**Prompt:** Write a letter to a character commenting on a decision he or she made and explain why you agree or disagree with that choice.

Make sure to keep the following things in mind:

- ✓ Your letter should have an introduction, body, and conclusion.
  - **Beginning:** Explain why you are writing, the decision made by the character, and whether or not you agree or disagree with that decision.
  - **Middle:** Provide support and reasons for why you agree or disagree with the decision. Comment on your personal experiences connected to the decision.
  - **Conclusion:** Offer alternative ways to deal with the decision in the future if you disagreed **OR** conclude by reinstating your agreement with the decision and why.
- ✓ You should clearly state the decision your character made and why you agree or disagree with the decision.
- ✓ Offer concrete evidence from the text explaining your reasons, showing me you have read your book.
- ✓ Apply writing strategies learned in the past—brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing.

**Remember to set up your  
assignment in a friendly letter  
format😊**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ period \_\_\_\_\_

	Return Address Line 1 (1) Return Address Line 2 Date (Month Day, Year) (2)
Dear Name of Recipient, (3)	
(4) Body Paragraph 1 - Explain why you are writing, the decision made by the character, and whether or not you agree or disagree with that decision. .... ..... .....	
Body Paragraph 2 - Provide support for your reasoning why you agree or disagree with the decision. Comment on personal experience connected to the decision. .... ..... .....	
Body Paragraph 3 - . . Offer alternative ways to deal with the decision in the future if you disagreed <b>OR</b> conclude by reinstating your agreement with the decision and why. .... ..... .....	
Closing (Sincerely...), (5) Signature (6)	

1. Your Address: All that is needed is your street address on the first line and the city, state and zip on the second line. Insert a comma between the city and state. Leave two spaces before the zip.

2. Date: Put the date on which the letter was written in the format Month Day Year i.e. August 30, 2003. Skip a line between the date and the salutation.

3. Salutation: Usually starts out with Dear so and so. Note: There is a comma after the end of the salutation in a friendly letter.

4. Body: The body is where you write the content of the letter; the paragraphs should be single spaced with a skipped line between each paragraph. Skip 2 lines between the end of the body and the closing.

5. Closing: Let's the reader know that you are finished with your letter; usually ends with Sincerely, Sincerely yours, Thank you, and so on. Note that there is a comma after the end of the closing and only the first word in the closing is capitalized.

6. Signature: Your signature will go in this section, usually signed in black or blue ink with a pen.

## Appendix N

**Name:**

**Date:**

**Period:**

### Summer Reading Essay

CATEGORY	4 (20)	3 (15)	2 (10)	1 (5)
<b>Organization: Introduction</b>	The introduction grabs the reader's attention and states the main topic of the letter.	The introduction clearly states the main topic but does not particularly grab the reader's attention.	The introduction only states the main topic.	There is no evident introduction of the letter.
<b>Ideas: Accuracy of Facts</b>	The supportive facts clearly reveal an in-depth understanding of the book.	The supportive facts reveal an adequate understanding of the book.	The supportive facts lack substance and depth in demonstrating understanding of the book.	No facts are reported OR most are inaccurately reported.
<b>Ideas: Focus on Topic</b>	Main idea stands out and is clear and well-focused topic on the topic.	Main idea is clear and is focused adequately on the topic.	Main idea is somewhat clear but lacks focus.	The main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random focus.
<b>Organization: Conclusion</b>	The conclusion is strong and ties up all loose ends.	The conclusion is recognizable and ties up almost all the loose ends.	The conclusion is recognizable, but does not tie up several loose ends.	There is no clear conclusion, the paper just ends.
<b>Conventions: Grammar &amp; Spelling</b>	Writer makes minimal errors in grammar or spelling that do not distract the reader from the content.	Errors in grammar or spelling slightly distract the reader from the content.	Errors in grammar or spelling significantly distract the reader from the content.	Errors in grammar or spelling prevent the reader from understanding the content.

**Total Points:** \_\_\_\_\_ /100

## Appendix O

Name \_\_\_\_\_ period \_\_\_\_\_

### Summer Reading Graphic Organizer

**Brainstorming of Ideas:** Think about the decisions that characters made in your book. Decide if you agree or disagree with each decision.

character	decision	agree or disagree

**Topic Selection:** Select one of the decisions made by a character that you listed above. Put a star next to the one that you believe that you can best develop into a paper.

**Evidence:** You will need to provide evidence from the text that the decision made by the character was one with which you agree or disagree. You should have specific examples. Use this space to jot down information, ideas, page numbers that you will use in the body of your paper.

## Appendix P

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Period: \_\_\_\_\_

Goal Setting: Writing

STRENGTHS

--

WEAKNESSES

--



My Goals:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

What will I do to achieve my goal?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Target date: \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher Conference Approval: \_\_\_\_\_



*Adapted from Rolheiser, Bower, and Stevahn (2000)*

## Appendix Q

Name:

Date:

Period:

### Why Do We Write?

*Think about your writing territories and items on your writing collage.  
What possible topics might fit into the reasons we write?*

Purpose	Possible Writing Topics
• To express and reflect	
• To inform and explain	
• To evaluate and judge	
• To take a stand	
• To propose a solution	
• To analyze and interpret	
• To inquire and explore	
• To seek common ground	

*Now with the assigned purpose in mind, pick one of your topics and begin a brainstorming sheet for your next assignment. Have these items prepared for your next conference date.*



## Appendix R

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Period: \_\_\_\_\_

### Express and Reflect Essay

CATEGORY	25	20	15	10
<b>Focus on Topic (Content)</b>	There is one clear, well-focused topic. Main idea stands out and is supported by detailed information.	Main idea is clear but the supporting information is general.	Main idea is somewhat clear but there is a need for more supporting information.	The main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information.
<b>Sequencing (Organization)</b>	Details are placed in a logical order and the way they are presented effectively keeps the interest of the reader.	Details are placed in a logical order, but the way in which they are presented/introduced sometimes makes the writing less interesting.	Some details are not in a logical or expected order, and this distracts the reader.	Many details are not in a logical or expected order. There is little sense that the writing is organized.
<b>Adding Personality (Voice)</b>	The writer seems to be writing from knowledge or experience. The author has taken the ideas and made them "his own."	The writer seems to be drawing on knowledge or experience, but there is some lack of ownership of the topic.	The writer relates some of his own knowledge or experience, but it adds nothing to the discussion of the topic.	The writer has not tried to transform the information in a personal way. The ideas and the way they are expressed seem to belong to someone else.
<b>Support for Topic (Content)</b>	Relevant, telling, quality details give the reader important information that goes beyond the obvious or predictable.	Supporting details and information are relevant, but one key issue or portion of the storyline is unsupported.	Supporting details and information are relevant, but several key issues or portions of the storyline are unsupported.	Supporting details and information are typically unclear or not related to the topic.
<b>Grammar &amp; Spelling (Conventions)</b>	Writer makes 1-2 errors grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.	Writer makes 3-4 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.	Writer makes more than 4 -8 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.	Writer makes more than 9 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.

**Total Points:** \_\_\_\_\_/125

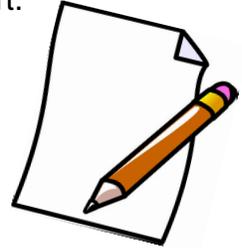
## Appendix S

What makes a good essay? What will Mrs. Binkley look for in my paper?

### **Ideas** (Content) (Focus)

Ideas explore the writer's main message through the use of a focused and narrow topic, quality details and strong support.

- clarity
- focus
- quality details that interest the reader
- strong support and documentation
- unique perspective



### **Organization**

Organization provides direction to the ideas so the reader is never lost and is able to follow the writer's thinking without effort.

- a strong lead that grab's the reader's attention
- pacing that moves fluidly through the text
- thoughtful use of transitions beyond "first, next, finally"
- clear connections between ideas
- a logical sequencing of information through the writing
- a conclusion that pulls the writing together in a graceful manner

### **Voice** (Style)

Voice is individuality, personality and a connection between the writer and reader that leaves the reader wanting more.

- personality
- enthusiasm and knowledge is apparent throughout the writing
- the writing is individual

### **Word Choice** (Style)

Word choice is the art of selecting precise language that attaches meaning to the message.

- dynamic verbs provide energy to the writing
- precise nouns provide clarity
- modifiers used sparingly but effectively
- everyday language used in unique ways
- language that matched the audience and purpose

**Sentence Fluency** (Style)

Sentence fluency allows the reader to move through text easily, using inflection to add to the meaning. The text sounds good to the ear.

rhythm of language

varied sentence beginnings

rhythm  
short, long and medium sentences are intermixed to aid the

easy to read without rehearsal

**Conventions**

Conventions enhance readability.

spelling, punctuation and grammar are attended to

at times, conventions add to the meaning

presentation and layout highlight key areas to support ideas

## Student Rubric IDEAS

- 6**
- ✓ My writing is clear, focused, and well developed. It will hold your attention.
  - ✓ You can tell just what my message is about.
  - ✓ I know this topic inside and out.
  - ✓ I help readers learn, think, and gain insight.
  - ✓ The details I chose will intrigue you—and perhaps teach you something.
- 5**
- ✓ My writing is clear and focused. I expand on key points.
  - ✓ I think the message is clear.
  - ✓ I know a lot about this topic.
  - ✓ I share important, interesting information.
  - ✓ I chose details that make the message interesting.
- 4**
- ✓ This paper is clear and focused most of the time.
  - ✓ You can tell what my main message is.
  - ✓ I know a few things about this topic.
  - ✓ I share some new information.
  - ✓ I came up with a few details and examples.
- 3**
- ✓ I wrote a list of ideas—I did not really develop any of them.
  - ✓ You might figure out my message or you might not.
  - ✓ I wish I knew more about this topic.
  - ✓ I ran out of things to say—it was hard to think of new information all the time.
  - ✓ I scrambled to come up with details.
- 2**
- ✓ My writing rambles—not all of it makes sense.
  - ✓ I am still figuring out what my message is.
  - ✓ I do NOT know enough about this topic to write.
  - ✓ I said some things I could not prove or support.
  - ✓ I could not come up with many details. Is it OK to repeat things?
- 1**
- ✓ I could not figure out what I wanted to say. I do not have a topic or a main idea yet.
  - ✓ I am sure I left my reader with a thousand questions.
  - ✓ How can I have information? I do not have a topic!
  - ✓ These are just random thoughts—whatever came to my head.
  - ✓ I just tried to fill up the page.

*Adapted from Spandel (2009)*

### Appendix T

#### PEER CONFERENCE REFLECTION SHEET

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ I am reviewing the portfolio of: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ The portfolio piece I am reviewing is called: \_\_\_\_\_

Example peer response starters:

*Remember to be positive in your response*

- I like ...
- You have shown that you understand ...
- Something that captured my attention ...
- I want to know more about ...
- Key words for me were ...
- I particularly valued ...
- A question raised in my mind is ...

- An idea that sparked for me was ...
- Something I identify with is ...
- What I found especially meaningful was ...
- Something you wrote that pushed my own thinking was ...
- I learned that you ...
- Thank you for reminding me how important it is to ...

PLEASE WRITE RESPONSE BELOW

## Appendix U

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Period: \_\_\_\_\_

### *Inform and Explain Essay Rubric (Informative)*

CATEGORY	20	15	10	5
<b>Introduction (Organization)</b>	The introduction is inviting (grabber), states the main topic and previews the structure of the paper.	The introduction clearly states the main topic and previews the structure of the paper, but is not particularly inviting to the reader (grabber).	The introduction states the main topic, but does not adequately preview the structure of the paper nor is it particularly inviting to the reader (grabber).	There is no clear introduction of the main topic or structure of the paper.
<b>Content Related to Topic</b>	Relevant, telling, quality details give the reader important information that supports the topic sentence and purpose for this informative piece of writing.	Supporting details and information are relevant, but one key issue or portion of the topic is not addressed for this informative piece of writing.	Supporting details and information are relevant, but several key issues or portions of the topic are not addressed for this informative piece of writing.	Supporting details and information are typically unclear or not related to the topic.
<b>Word Choice- Adjectives, Nouns, Adverbs, and Descriptive Sentences</b>	Writer uses vivid words and phrases that linger or draw pictures in the reader's mind, and the choice and placement of the words seems accurate, natural and not forced.	Writer uses vivid words and phrases that linger or draw pictures in the reader's mind, but occasionally the words are used inaccurately or seem overdone.	Writer uses words that communicate clearly, but the writing lacks variety, punch or flair.	Writer uses a limited vocabulary that does not communicate strongly or capture the reader's interest. Jargon or clichés may be present and detract from the meaning.
<b>Conclusion (Organization)</b>	The conclusion is strong and leaves the reader with a feeling that they understand what the writer is "getting at."	The conclusion is recognizable and ties up almost all the loose ends.	The conclusion is recognizable, but does not tie up several loose ends.	There is no clear conclusion, the paper just ends.
<b>Grammar &amp; Spelling (Conventions)</b>	Writer makes 1-2 errors in grammar or spelling (nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and end marks) that distract the reader from the content.	Writer makes 3-4 errors in grammar (nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and end marks) or spelling that distract the reader from the content.	Writer makes 5-7 errors in grammar (nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and end marks) or spelling that distract the reader from the content.	Writer makes more than 7 errors in grammar (nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and end marks) or spelling that distract the reader from the content.

**Total Points: \_\_\_\_\_/100 points**

## Appendix V

Name:

Date:

Period:

### Informative Writing Checklist

Check off all items after you have revised and completed them:

Introduction:

- \_\_\_ Do you have a topic sentence that explains what your essay is about?
- \_\_\_ Do you preview your main points of your essay?
- \_\_\_ Do you “hook” your readers with an interesting grabber at the beginning of your essay?

Body:

- \_\_\_ Have you organized your ideas in a manner that flows and makes sense?
- \_\_\_ Have you referenced the sources of information you have given that you researched?
- \_\_\_ Do each of your paragraphs have a transition from one to the next?
- \_\_\_ Do each of your paragraphs continually interest your reader to want to read?

Conclusion:

- \_\_\_ Do you summarize your main points and restate your topic?
- \_\_\_ Do you leave your reader interested to find out more about your topic?

Once you are done verifying all of these items, please answer the following questions. Then come see me to complete your writing conference:

- 1) *What is the best part of this piece so far?*
  
- 2) *What do you feel you still need to work on?*
  
- 3) *How can I better help you to meet your goals?*

## Appendix W

**Name:**

**Date:**

**Period:**

### Writing Portfolio: Final Submission

#### **How will I select which items go into my portfolio?**

Your portfolio is primarily the construction of your own selection of items to include. There are some required items and criteria to guide and ensure that you meet the objectives and purpose for the portfolio. Below is a break down of how you should select your items:

- ✓ Writing Collage (use as a cover for your portfolio)
- ✓ Table of Contents (an example will be provided in class)
- ✓ The final reflective letter (see instructions to follow)
- ✓ Your goal sheet and goal reflections
- ✓ A different writing sample that indicates your learning in each of the criteria outlined in the final reflective letter (which can include the narrative, informative, and resume pieces. Additional items will also be needed).
- ✓ One set of conference reflection notes
- ✓ The narrative story and accompanying reflection and peer conference notes
- ✓ The informative essay and accompanying reflection and peer conference notes
- ✓ The resume and accompanying reflection and peer conference notes
- ✓ A different writing piece that meets all other criteria needed for the final reflective piece and their accompanying reflection notes.

#### **How will I reflect on the portfolio and the items I put into it?**

A final reflective letter will be present in your final portfolio as an introductory piece to explain how your portfolio is organized, why you chose the items included in the portfolio, and what you have learned as a result of the portfolio creation process. Directions for the letter are attached to this sheet.

#### **How will I be graded on the portfolio?**

You are welcome to re-submit any items in the portfolio that you wish to be re-assessed a second time to improve upon your final graded rubric for the assessments. Please attach a post-it note labeled re-grade, so that I know you would like me to look at additional changes on that draft. Make sure you have included all drafting materials for pieces submitted.

Your portfolio will be assessed on a variety of levels through a rubric. First, the inclusion of individual pieces and that they meet the purpose of inclusion will be assessed. Next, the portfolio as a whole will be looked at, assessing whether or not it shows your growth and understanding of writing elements and style. Then, your reflection letter will be examined carefully as to whether or not thoughtful consideration occurred in the placement and purpose of items in the portfolio. This will help me see the purpose of the included items in the portfolio. A final conference period will also be offered for students who wish to meet in developing their final portfolio.

## Appendix X

### Introductory Reflective Letter

The introductory letter is a narrative, reflective piece of writing that will ultimately show your understanding of how each of the pieces you've included in your portfolio have impacted your learning throughout the writing units we've completed up until this point. The ultimate goal of this letter is to look at your learning in writing as a whole, examining the goals you've made, and how you've met them throughout the units. Each paragraph of your narrative letter and the set-up instructions are provided below on this sheet. In addition, the instructions will map out which pieces are required in the portfolio and which are not.

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

*My portfolio is organized...*

(In this paragraph, describe how you decided to organize your portfolio and identify that there is a table on contents for easy reference).

*The goals I created at the beginning of year guided me through my learning because ...*

(In this paragraph, describe the goals you created and how you continually addressed them through the units of study. Discuss one or two pieces in your portfolio that particularly helped you meet your goals and why).

*My portfolio shows I am ...*

(Tell me what I should learn about you as a student from the portfolio. Identify three descriptive words that relay who you have become as a writer and identify a piece that reflects those qualities. Explain how that piece of writing guided you to become that type of learner).

*My best piece of work is ...*

(Identify your best piece of work in your portfolio and explain why).

*My favorite piece of work is ...*

(Identify your favorite piece of work in your portfolio and explain why).

*The piece that shows my best effort is ...*

(Identify the piece that shows your best effort and explain why).

I want you to notice...

(Tell me anything you want about creating your portfolio and you as a learner through this process that might not be easily evident. Identify any pieces you have chosen to include that do are not described above and why you have included them in your portfolio. You should have at least three additional pieces).

I think I have grown because...

(Describe how you have grown through this portfolio process. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of your portfolio. Describe whether or not you think creating the portfolio helped you become a better learner and why).

Next year, I plan on working on...

(Re-evaluate the goals you created and discuss the goals you might want to accomplish next year).

Sincerely,

[Your name signed]

## Appendix Y

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Period: \_\_\_\_\_

**Final Portfolio: Assessment Rubric**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>20 (REQUIREMENT RESUBMISSION)</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Presentation and Visual Appeal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Items in the portfolio are not neat and organized.</li> <li>-The cover is not colorful or eye-catching.</li> <li>-The portfolio is not in a binder or folder.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Some portfolio items are neat and organized.</li> <li>-The cover is somewhat colorful and eye-catching.</li> <li>-The portfolio is presented in a folder, not a binder.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Most portfolio items are neat and organized.</li> <li>-The cover is mostly colorful and eye-catching.</li> <li>-The portfolio is presented in a binder.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-All portfolio items are neat and organized.</li> <li>-The cover is colorful and eye-catching.</li> <li>-The portfolio is presented in a binder beyond specifications.</li> </ul>
<b>Organization</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-There is no table of contents.</li> <li>-Items are not in order according to the table of contents.</li> <li>-Portfolio is not organized.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The table of contents is somewhat clear.</li> <li>-Some items are in order according to the table of contents.</li> <li>-Organization created by the student is somewhat appropriate for the purpose of the portfolio.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The table of contents is mostly clear.</li> <li>-Most items are in order according to the table of contents.</li> <li>-Organization created by the student is mostly appropriate for the purpose of the portfolio.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-There is a clear table of contents.</li> <li>-All items are in order according to the table of contents.</li> <li>-Organization created by the student is appropriate for the purpose of the portfolio.</li> </ul>
<b>Growth and Experiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-There are no goals identified.</li> <li>-Reflections are not included.</li> <li>-No corrections on any work are made.</li> <li>-The student does not identify or analyze any learning experience through the writing portfolio.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Unrealistic goals for the portfolio are set.</li> <li>-All reflections state the same exact realizations.</li> <li>-Few corrections on any work are made or corrections made do not improve the quality of work.</li> <li>-Student identifies learning experiences with some relevance to his or her learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The goals set for the portfolio are mostly realistic.</li> <li>-A variety of reflections (student reflects on strengths and weaknesses) are evident.</li> <li>-Some corrections on work are evident.</li> <li>-Student identifies and analyzes learning experiences, along with the relevance of those experiences to his or her learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The goals et for the portfolio are realistic.</li> <li>-A wise variety of reflections (student reflects on strengths and weaknesses) are evident.</li> <li>-Student attempts to correct work in the portfolio.</li> <li>-Student identifies and analyzes throughout the portfolio, creating insights on learning experiences, along with the relevance of those learning experiences to his or her learning.</li> </ul>
<b>Required Items</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Items presented are not writing items.</li> <li>-There are not any drafts for process-writing pieces.</li> <li>-There are not any peer reflections included with any pieces of writing.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Some required items are included.</li> <li>-Some drafts of process writing pieces are included.</li> <li>-There are some peer reflections included with pieces of writing.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Most required items are included.</li> <li>-Most drafts of process writing pieces are included.</li> <li>-There are most required peer reflections included with many pieces of writing.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-All required items are included.</li> <li>-All drafts of process writing pieces are included.</li> <li>-All required peer reflections are included with each piece of writing.</li> </ul>

**Total Points:** \_\_\_\_\_/200