Using Portfolios to Assess Learning in Chemistry: One School’s Story of Evolving Assessment Practice

by

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Curriculum and Instruction

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October 27, 1997
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: Portfolio, Authentic Assessment

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the process of implementing an alternative form of assessment in chemistry classrooms. The current reform of science education involves the implementation of varied forms of instruction; it stands to reason that assessment will evolve with the curriculum (Baxter, Shavelson, Goldman & Pine, 1992). In an era for which the exclusive use of multiple-choice and similar tests i.e., fill-in-the-blank, matching, and true/false are inappropriate measures of student abilities (Hamm & Adams, 1991), portfolios can offer a suitable alternative assessment, as well as a means for evaluation (Paulson, Paulson & Meyer, 1991).

This study was conducted in a small math, science and technology high school and focused on three individual teachers and twelve of their students. The research focused on how teachers defined portfolios and implemented this assessment tool in their classrooms and how students and teachers perceived the use and value of the process.

This study employed qualitative methodology using individual interviews, document analyses, and classroom observations. Data sources
included documents, transcripts of interviews and fieldnotes.

The primary research questions were: How do the teachers define and implement portfolios? How do the teachers’ definitions of portfolios change during implementation? What are the students’ understandings of portfolios and how they are used and do the students’ understandings change? What do teachers and students believe portfolios represent regarding the learning that occurs in the science classroom? and What do the data collected via this study demonstrate about portfolios as a valid means of assessing student progress?

The teachers’ and students’ definitions addressed four of the six components of portfolios identified in the literature. Both groups recognized a defined use, evidence, student and teacher made decisions, and reflection as key portfolio elements. Each group failed to identify the components of a defined goal and teacher student conferences.

Portfolios were viewed by the teachers and students as a valuable tool. This value was defined in terms of student self assessment and evaluation, teacher assessment and evaluation, college admission, goal setting, promotion of student organizational skills and recognition of student success.
Acknowledgements

Earning my Ph. D. at Va Tech has allowed me to take advantage of many opportunities that will benefit me for the remainder of my career in education. I have had the good fortune to acquire colleagues and friends in my journey. Intellectually I have been influenced and challenged by the courses and the conversations in which I have engaged during my studies.

I am eternally grateful to many of the faculty in the College of Education. My deepest and sincerest appreciation goes to Mary Ann Lewis for her unending support and concern. Bonnie Billingsley, Tom Sherman, Tom Hunt, Jerry Niles and Kathleen Carico also deserve my appreciation. They all showed an interest and concern when I needed a kind word. Jan Nespor challenged and inspired me through his numerous courses and insightful comments.

Additional thanks need to be extended to the wonderful support staff in the College. Tammie Smith has helped me out more times that I could possibly list. Michelle Griffith has provided me with answers to stupid questions and also many warm smiles. Carmelita Bishop and Bonnie Guthrie were always friendly and helped out when I needed assistance. Judy Davis was a godsend my last year while I was working in the Dean’s Office. Barbara Kellison was always helpful in my communications with the graduate school. Thanks to all of you, I could not have made it without your help.

I wish to thank those friends who offered words of support, encouragement and listened to my struggles as I navigated my way through this arduous course. In particular, I wish to thank Charles Starkey, for his unending, unyielding support, especially his weekly phone calls. I wish to also thank Becky Nelson for her patient easy going nature and her unshakeable faith. Also my gratitude is extended to Linda Fore. Her example gave me inspiration and her presence gave me hope. We had lunch together, socialized at conferences and discussed numerous topics in education.

During my first two years at Tech, Brenda Brand supported me and listened to me when no one else seemed to care. Thanks is extended to Marge Lichty for her support during my last year at Tech. I also wish to thank my student teachers for giving me the opportunity to “practice” on them. Michele McLeod listened and supported me during the summers as we taught in the Roanoke City Summer Scholars/Honors Program. She
helped me to understand the complexity and wonders of elementary school teaching.

Words of thanks are also extended to Christine Adair, Judy Helms and Lora Layton --- these individuals demonstrated to me that even though they were far away their true friendships exceeded the miles and months of neglect. They supported, called and always believed in me. Thanks you guys!!!!! Special acknowledgement also goes to Glenn Watson, a special person in my life. He was there during the arduous job search and dried my tears on more than one occasion. I love you all very much.

My faculty committee challenged and helped me as I moved from the realm of teacher/student to the realm of professor. I will strive to become the professionals they are and will always remember their examples. My chairperson, Tom Teates was very patient and helpful even though, during the last two years, he was in retirement. Mike Bentley was very supportive and nurturing during my last year at Tech. Sue Magliaro gave me a shining example to follow. She is an excellent teacher and disciplined researcher. Melanie Biermann provided me with friendship and helped me have faith in my own abilities. She transgressed the student professor barrier and became a dear and cherished friend. John Kowalski was more than a committee member, he too was a friend and highly respected colleague. Each of you has my eternal gratitude.
I dedicate this document to my
caring and loving Mother,

wonderful baby Sister and

my thoughtful Brother and Sister in Law.

Thank you ------------I love you all very much!!!
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