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ABSTRACT

The gap between learning and assessment is apparent both in the beliefs of children, who often see no connection between the two, and in the practices of teachers, who do not choose to use the most recently developed means of assessment. This gap stems from management theory and from learning theory. Traditional management in the United States has separated production and inspection, and traditional learning theory has seen learning as passive. Portfolios present the opportunity to address the gap between assessment and learning if educators recognize learning as an active process and if they apply the principles of management of W. Edwards Deming to their construction and evaluation. The key to the Deming approach is in process-based evaluation: it builds quality into the process and does not impose it from the outside. Examples of elementary school students' portfolio building illustrate the use of portfolios with emotionally disturbed and learning-disabled students. Portfolios offer an opportunity for assessment that empowers learning, rather than assessment that polices learners. (Contains 17 references.) (SLD)

# Bridging the Gap: Applying Deming's 'Quality by Design' to Portfolios

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My work with portfolios reflects a continuing interest in making assessment information useful in the classroom. We give many tests, but I see little evidence that teachers actually use the results. People in testing have a ready explanation. They point out that few teachers receive formal training on tests and measurement during teacher preparation. The implication is that they would use test results if they knew more about them.

Let me tell you a story. Several years ago I was asked by a local district to develop a series of criterion referenced tests tied to the district's curriculum. The district selected a team of teachers and gave them release time to work with me on the project. We worked together for maybe three years during which time I trained them in test development including developing blueprints, writing and editing items, conducting field tests, interpreting statistics, and designing custom reporting forms.

I felt the project had accomplished two things. First, the district had locally designed tests tied to the curriculum which were reported on teacher–friendly forms returned to the classroom in less than one week, all with buy–in from teachers. Second, the district had a trained cadre of sophisticated test developers who knew and understood testing.

About a year later the district hired a new superintendent who made giving the CRTs optional. I was not surprised that teachers opted not to give the tests. What did surprise me was that all of the teachers I had so carefully trained decided not to give the tests. I made some phone calls and was told that the only reason they had written the tests was because the district asked them to. As teachers, they had no interest in the results. There was a message in all this. Their indifference could not be explained away by saying they lacked training in tests and measures. They were skillful test developers, yet

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they couldn't have cared less about the results. Clearly there was a gap between instruction and assessment, a gap which had little to do with teacher training.

But actually, experiences like this one have led me to rethink many of the assumptions underlying assessment that go far deeper than the format of the test. My theme today is that you can't separate learning from assessment. They occur simultaneously. In fact, I believe that the most effective instruction occurs when the learner and the assessor become the same person. If we want students to take charge of their learning, they must also take charge of their assessment. One way to do this is through the student portfolios.

About a year ago I met with a group of students in a program for the emotionally disabled. My task was to interest them in doing portfolios. I wasn't 100% successful. One listener said,

> I hate portfolios because they're too much of a hassle.

But one found the portfolio a meaningful personal experience.

> I like portfolios because you put stuff in them and it makes room in your desk.

Even some college students would agree with the student who said portfolios are too much of a hassle. Lewis and Clark College accepts admission portfolios as an alternative to their traditional application procedures but only a small percentage of applicants choose the portfolio option. Their admissions director told me that students find it easier to submit a transcript and SAT scores.

So why do portfolios at all if they are more of a hassle than traditional methods? To answer this, consider why we assess at all. Assessment plays a role in education similar to the role inspection plays in industry. We assess to ensure that we are providing quality education which maintains high standards. Quality by Assessment! Certainly the justification for giving achievement tests reflects this view. Kids go forth with certificates stamped "Inspected by the *Iowa Test of Basic Skills*, Form J," our guarantee that a quality education has been received. The quality by inspection model is simple, straightforward, and powerful. It is widely accepted both inside and outside of education.

But, how well is this system of ensuring quality through inspection working? There are growing indications that it may not be working all that well.

The National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing recently published a report by Lori Shepard (1992) that asked *Will National Tests Improve Student Learning?* After an extensive review of the literature, Shepard concluded

> Research evidence on the effects of traditional standardized tests when used as high–stakes accountability instruments is strikingly negative. It would not be far fetched to say that testing in the past decade has actually reduced the quality of instruction for many students rather than improving education. (p. 16)

Tierney, Carter, & Desai (1991) in their outstanding book on portfolio assessment also reviewed assessment practices and came to this conclusion:

> As we reflected upon assessment procedures in place in most schools, we realized that students were not involved. It seemed as if assessment were used to police rather than enhance learning. (p. 108, abbreviated for brevity)

Here is yet another opinion. Kenneth Gray writing in the January *Phi Delta Kappan* argues that the testing itself may have actually taken on a life of its own having little to do with quality educational standards.

> ...a close examination of high schools suggests that their real purpose is not educating but rank ordering the graduating class (p. 373).

My final quotation in this series comes from a group of third graders who had just had their first encounter with the district mandated *California Achievement Test*. The district's math curriculum encouraged children to work together in groups to solve problems, a highly valued skill in American industry. When the test came along, they couldn't understand why they weren't allowed to work together to solve the problems. "Why can't we work together," they wanted to

know, "That's how we always solve math problems." To these children, there was a gap between learning and assessment that made no sense at all.

But this gap is everywhere. Consider how curriculum and assessment departments are usually administered and housed. Curriculum in one office, Assessment another.

Where does this learning/assessment gap come from? I think it has two sources, one is management theory, the other learning theory.

In the early years of this century Frederick Winslow Taylor introduced American industry to the concept of setting output standards that defined acceptable performance. Taylor's approach remained the guiding principle in American industry for almost 75 years. Taylor's book, *Scientific Management,* was adopted directly into educational thinking through the work of Mager, Tyler and others (Grey, 1993). The language is familiar: clearly defined objectives, measurable outcomes. The concept of measurable outcomes is particularly important to scientific management. These are outcomes expressed in terms of numbers. We in education, have developed a habit of thinking about outcomes as something that can be expressed in numbers. Thus, the concepts of scientific management have become deeply entrenched in educational thinking. Whether it be a dated term like 'management by objectives' or the latest in buzz words — 'outcomes–based education', 'benchmarks' — the focus remains setting standards and inspecting the output in quantitative terms to ensure that the standards are met. Production: Inspection. Curriculum: Assessment. Separate functions, each with a unique responsibility for the success of the whole.

The second factor supporting the gulf is that many educators understand learning to be passive. This means that teaching involves transmitting knowledge and learning involves receiving it (Shepard, 1991). When we generate laundry lists of skills and knowledge kids are supposed to acquire, and then design achievement tests focused on those specific skills and knowledge, we assume learning is passive. Many of the theories of learning developed during the first half of the 20th century support this view explicitly (Mayer, 1992). Thus, the classroom is a kind of educational service station where students line up for a "knowledge fill up" while the evaluation department's inspectors determine exactly how much knowledge actually "stays in the tank." Quality is assured by independent inspection of a predefined outcome.

But as there are two sources of the quality by inspection strategy, there are also two things wrong with it. First, learning is active, not passive. The second is industry itself has begun to abandon the quality by inspection strategy.

Let's start with learning. I like the way the neurobiologist Graham Hoyle (quoted in Calvin, 1990) explains the way the brain works:

> What you've got to realize is that every cell in the nervous system is not sitting there waiting to be told what to do. It's doing it the whole darn time. If there's input to the nervous system, fine. It will react to it. But the nervous system is primarily a device for generating action spontaneously. It's an ongoing affair. The biggest mistake that people make is in thinking of it as a input–output device.

Contemporary learning theory assumes an active learner, thanks to Piaget and many others. The emerging view is that knowledge is something learners construct, not something they receive (see Meyer, 1992). That puts the student in charge.

Knowledge as something the learner constructs is not a new idea. John Dewey was talking about it 100 years ago. It means that what someone learns and how they remember, understand, and represent that knowledge varies with many factors including experience, culture, the learning environment, and the anticipated assessment.

The second problem with quality by inspection is that the principles of scientific management are themselves being called into question by industry itself. Let me illustrate the problems with a quotation from the Toronto Sun (April 25, 1983, quoted in Gitlow & Gitlow, 1987, p. 32).

> They're still laughing about this at IBM.

> Apparently the computer giant decided to have some parts manufactured in Japan as a trial project.
>
> In the specifications they set out that the limit of defective parts would be acceptable at three units per 10,000.
>
> When the delivery came in there was an accompanying letter.
>
> "We Japanese have a hard time understanding North American business practices. But the three defective parts per 10,000 have been included and are wrapped separately. Hope this pleases."

"Set high standards and test to ensure those standards are met." That statement has a familiar ring. Phrases like that appear in almost everybody's educational reform legislation. Yet, IBM's effort to set high standards and implement strict quality control had the exact opposite of the intended effect. Instead of improving quality, the high standards in effect institutionalized mediocrity.

Let's talk a little about quality control from the viewpoint of IBM's Japanese subcontractor. IBM's request probably looked strange to the Japanese because Japanese industry has a totally different philosophy of quality control. If you think their philosophy is from a book by an ancient master called, say, the *Tao of Quality Control*, you are mistaken. The book on quality control used in Japan industry was written by an American with a PhD in statistics named W. Edwards Deming.

Let me say just a few words about Deming for those of you who are unfamiliar with him, although he seems to be quickly achieving the status of folk hero (See Bonstingl, 1992). Deming began his career as a quality control specialist for the telephone industry where he developed a system that replaced end–of–the–line inspection with on–line quality control. His procedures were hard for many to swallow because they required companies to change the way they were managed. At the time Deming began promoting his concepts, America was the leading industrial power in the post World War II world and the attitude was "don't fix it if it ain't broke." Eventually, Deming found his way to Japan whose industry had a well earned reputation for producing 'cheap copies.' The Japanese industrialists jumped at what Deming was saying and, as I'm sure you are aware, the quality of Japanese products has skyrocketed since the late '40s.

Deming's ideas have now come home to help American industry. Several years ago Ford initiated a major effort to implement Deming's ideas, an effort which is now paying off in a sharp rise in the consumer satisfaction ratings of Ford products. General Motors has also implemented Deming's quality control principles in its new Saturn Division. Today, Ford sales are up and Saturn (recently ranked number three in customer satisfaction) literally cannot keep up with orders. Customer satisfaction is up because the companies are building better cars. They build better cars because quality control is designed into the manufacturing process, not imposed by inspecting the end product.

To me, the key to Deming's approach is not outcomes based, it is process based. Process based evaluation is what I see as a major feature of portfolio assessment. Let me illustrate by describing a portfolio project done by a teacher enrolled in my class on portfolio assessment. I require teachers in my class to put together a portfolio. To me, the portfolio is a personal learning environment. Therefore, I do not specify contents. Rather, I tell them I'm less interested in WHAT is in their portfolio than WHY it is there. Thus, deciding on the purpose of their portfolio and what it should contain becomes the major challenge. One of my favorite quotations from Deming's book is,

> Improvement of quality is a method transferable to different problems and circumstances. It does not consist of cookbook procedures on file ready for specific application to this or that kind of product (Deming, 1986, p. 128).

In other words, no cookbooks. I require class members to reinvent the portfolio wheel and to fit it to their particular circumstance. People often ask why I require each person to reinvent the wheel? My answer? Then it's THEIR wheel.

Darlene Frazier was one of the teachers in this

class (see Frazier & Paulson, 1992, Paulson, Paulson & Frazier, in press). Frazier had a special education pullout class of learning disabled fourth graders struggling with writing. She decided to do her portfolio "...to track the learning of my class of learning disabled students." She then decided that an important part of her portfolio would be examples of her students writings collected over time. Then Frazier did an unusual and inspired thing when the time came for her to start collecting examples for her portfolio. She went to her students and asked THEM to select the examples to put into her portfolio. She told them she was taking a class and as part of that class she needed to prove that they were learning to write better and challenged them to provide the evidence. The kids loved the idea and jumped on the opportunity of making a positive contribution to their teacher's portfolio. Frazier was, in effect, taking the stance of a supervisor in a Deming shop who was asking the workers to make quality control decisions.

It is difficult to take an idea from one field like manufacturing and transfer it to another like education (See *Educational Leadership,* November 1992; and *Phi Delta Kappan,* January 1993) especially when the approach requires a comprehensive change in the way organizations are structured and managed. I will limit my comments to portfolios in the classroom. Think of the classroom as an enterprise with a supervisor and several workers. In doing so, I will further limit myself to two of Deming's areas of concern: quality by design; and the supervision of workers.

In the Deming approach, management's role is more to facilitate than control and workers assume a much larger role in determining goals, production schedules, controlling quality, and engaging in self–management. Usually, when Deming's principles are applied to education, administrators are considered the facilitators, teachers the worker–managers, and the child as the ultimate customer of the service.

My own version differs a little. I don't think of students as customers and schools don't exist to serve students. Schools exist to serve society in a very broad sense. Rather than customers, I see the students as the production workers (See Brandt, 1992) whose job is to get an education. Remember the new learning theory — learning is what the learner does, knowledge is what the learner constructs. Teaching involves facilitating learning and managing the learning environment, an enormously challenging task but a supervisory one nonetheless.

If you think of students as workers and teachers as supervisors, then the Deming principles of supervision make a lot of sense when applied to the classroom. Let's return to Darlene Frazier's classroom. Frazier's students were so enthusiastic about contributing to her portfolio that by midyear they asked her to do portfolios of their own. I'd like to share one of those portfolios with you because it illustrates how quality by design began to permeate the classroom. Sara chose to use Darlene's portfolio as a model, thus its rather formal organization (see F. Paulson & Paulson, 1992-b).

This appears as the first page of Sara's portfoli:, it's what Sarah herself wrote when she gave her reason for having a portfolio.

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Rationale

I want to use this portfolio to improve my writing.

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Think of the Deming principle of building quality into the process, not imposing it from outside. Sarah is not concerned with outside inspection. She did not write "I want to use this portfolio to pass writing," or "to get a good grade," or even "to satisfy state requirements." Sarah said, "I want to use this portfolio to improve my writing." To me, this one simple statement is more powerful than all the laundry lists of mandated knowledge and skills so common in education. This statement incorporates quality by design, the force behind Deming's goal of "never–ending improvement."

But having a purpose for a portfolio is only

the first step. How does Sarah use her portfolio to improve her writing? Well, Sarah, with Frazier's help, developed a plan. For one thing, Sarah identifies the issues that she wants to address that will make her a better writer. Sarah sets goals.

Notice the difference between this and the traditional management–by–outcomes view that the curriculum tells the child what to learn in order to be a good writer. But Frazier sat down with her students in what Deming might call a Quality–Control Circle and they, teacher and students as a group, talked about good writing and what they could do to improve. Here is the second page of Sarah's portfolio where she lists specific goals she chose to work on. By the way, this is but one example. Each of Sarah's classmates developed a unique list.

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Intents

I want to improve my punctuation.

I want to improve my AWA scores.

I want to improve my imagination in writing stories to make them better.

---

But a part of setting goals is to consider standards. How do we know when we reach our goals? Here is the next page in Sarah's portfolio. Part of the discussion in the Quality–Control Circle concerned standards — how people decided what constitutes good writing.

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Standards

There will be more checks on the punctuation check list.

Scores on AWA this year will remain the same or go up.

Scores on "word choice" should go up.

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I am convinced that children learn best when they also learn to set their own goals and standards and develop skill at judging their own performance. This is consistent with the new learning theory (see Zimmerman, Bandura, & Pons, 1992). But that doesn't mean rejecting someone else's standards. Some of the students in Frazier's class referred to standards that appeared in the State Department of Education's analytic scoring rubric ("I want to improve my AWA scores").

However, the way Frazier structured the experience put the students, not the State of Oregon, in control. First, she presented the rubric to show them what the State's inspector would be looking for, not so much (in my opinion) to define good writing but to help them understand how they would be judged by others. But, when she taught them to use the rubric, and they did so on a regular basis, Frazier allowed them to establish their own standards for making judgments. They worked together in little Quality–Control Circles to negotiate the scores they gave themselves and each other. Their negotiated '3' might be very different from the '3' awarded by a trained inspector, but that doesn't matter. What does matter is that they were learning to judge the quality of their work and that today's '3' becomes the basis against which they judge tomorrow's work. The goal is "Never–Ending Improvement," not passing a test, satisfying the state, or pleasing a third party. I think of this as a way Frazier found to encourage quality work despite state mandated standards.

But Frazier also encouraged the students to develop their own personal goals and standards for good work. One of the things Sarah chose to work on was punctuation. Here is a checklist that Frazier and Sarah developed together. Sarah used it regularly. It is one of the ways Frazier worked with Sarah to help her learn to recognize quality work. The key to quality by design is that Frazier and Sarah worked together to develop this checklist. It would have been far less effective if Frazier had pulled out an already existing checklist and imposed it. Building the quality control procedures themselves was a major feature in Frazier's instructional program.

Punctuation Pals

__ Period at the end of sentence

__ Question mark at the end of question

__ Exclamation marks to show excitement

__ Quotation marks when someone is speaking

__ Commas for pauses

This is part of an area called student–negotiated standards (See P. Paulson & Paulson, 1992-c) that has major implications for portfolio assessment. Let me share another example, this one is from Wyoming, Michigan. Last year, when Marie Spaak started her short story unit, she distributed examples of short stories including published stories and stories written by students in last year's class. The children discussed the examples and brainstormed about what characterized a good short story. After the discussion, she handed out empty rubric forms and asked each child to write personal standards for a well written short story. These student–negotiated standards became the basis for evaluating each student's performance on the unit.

Short Story

Character

Is there one character that plays the most important role?

Plot

Is there a problem?

Does the action build to a climax?

Is the problem solved?

Is there a conclusion?

Theme

Does the story present an important idea about life?

Other

Is the paper neat?

Is the paper free of run on sentences?

Is the paper free of spelling and grammatical errors?

Here is one student's rubric. Again, the class and the teacher form a Quality–Control Circle that helps each student assume responsibility for producing quality work.

Now lets turn to the question of what contents Sarah chooses for her portfolio. Although she discussed her selections with her teacher, Sarah chose all the items herself. She included final drafts, rough drafts, and copies of the punctuation checklist. She also kept a record of her self–assessments using the analytic writing rubric. She knew why each piece was there and she had a plan for using that knowledge to reach her goal. She turned her portfolio into a step–by–step record of her growth as a writer. Quality by design, not quality by inspection.

Another part of putting together a portfolio is reflecting, making judgments about the contents themselves. These reflections are an important part of quality control. Sarah developed an evaluation plan for her portfolio (I suspect Sarah may have been familiar with IEPs).

Judgment

I will write a cognitive letter discussing how well I meet my intents.

A review of my punctuation checklist plus a review of my AWA scores, plus a review of my cognitive letter will help people look at my portfolio to make a judgment.

Sarah did not actually finish her portfolio. She was judged ready to return to her regular class. Here are some final judgment statements that some of the other children in her class wrote. Remember, at the beginning of the year they were defeated — unwilling to write. Here is what some of them wrote at the end.

Dear People,

I think I improved in my cursive writing and my AWA scores. If you do not believe me look in my portfolio, it has proof. Just read my first story and my last....

Dear Reader,

....I am doing good in Voice. I just don't say "I don't like voice very much." That's not the way Voice is. "I hate Voice." That's the way Voice is.

Thank you for reading my portfolio. I hope you see how I improved. I am still trying. Thank you.

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If quality is to be built into the system rather than imposed from outside, then the workers become the essential element of quality control. Saturn builds quality automobiles because management trains workers in quality control and holds them responsible for it. If Saturn's employees were students, they would be setting their own goals, negotiating their own standards, designing their own tests — which is exactly what was going on in Sarah's class.

In Deming's approach, workers are not trained just to produce products, they are trained to produce quality products in an atmosphere where standards are not fixed, but are constantly being raised through the efforts of the production workers themselves. Rather than address fixed standards set externally, workers are concerned that today's standard is higher than yesterday's standard, and tomorrow's standard is higher still. Deming calls this never–ending improvement. Setting standards is a necessary part of quality and must not be imposed externally. Deming writes

> Goals are necessary for you and for me, but numerical goals set for other people, without a road map to reach that goal, have effects opposite to the effects sought (Deming, 1986, p. 69).

To Deming, the strategy "set high standards and test to be sure they are reached" is a loser likely to yield exactly the outcome Shepard (1992, op. cit.) found in her research on achievement tests used for high–stakes accountability.

Recently I was video–taping a second grader named Colin as he showed me his portfolio. Colin's teacher, Cathy Ryan, believes that students should choose everything that goes into their portfolios. Thus, in Ryan's classroom the students have a primary responsibility for controlling quality. One of her major responsibilities is helping Colin and his classmates become better evaluators of their own work. I asked Colin, "What is a portfolio?" He told me, "It's where I keep my best work." Then he said, "My goal is to have all my work in the portfolio because it's all my best work."

If the worker's job is quality production, then in Deming's approach, it is management's job to listen, respond, support, and remove obstacles. In all Deming companies, workers are encouraged to make recommendations for improving quality. Frequently, as many as 90% do so on a regular basis. But here is the thing that sets the approach apart. Management, in these companies, implements 90% of the suggestions received (Gitlow & Gitlow, 1987). This management strategy does two things. First it leads directly to improvement of the quality of the goods produced. But it also sends a message to workers that the company truly values quality work. Remember the third graders who were not allowed to use group problem solving skills on the district's achievement test. I wonder what message they got about what the district values.

Howard and Shelly Gitlow in their book on Deming have this to say about supervision:

> Instituting modern methods of supervision is managing for success. It generates a positive atmosphere because supervisors are not policing workers and blaming them for the handicaps of the system. The worker is treated with dignity, trained and supervised properly, and knows what the job is so that performance can improve. (Gitlow & Gitlow, 1987)

In my closing example, I return to the same school where one student told me he hated portfolios because they were a hassle and another valued them only as a way to make room in her desk. While Darlene Frazier's students may have been academic rejects, the Wynn Watts students are society's rejects. The school serves a troubled population of junior and senior high aged pupils. Most have been abused, some are wards of the court, some have police records, many have a history of inappropriate social

behavior that requires separation from regular classes. Some live in dormitories on site. They see themselves as victims of forces over which they have no control and typically react to anything new or out of the ordinary (such as portfolios) with passive hostility (See F. Paulson & Paulson, 1992-a).

The teachers at the school (Jim Allison, Mike Cenedella, Christine Downs, JoAnn Michaelis, and Karen Zabel) had worked for about a year to adapt portfolio assessment for these students in the hope that through portfolios, these passive, turned off students would begin to take responsibility for their own learning. Their approach was to make the students responsible for their own portfolios and the choice of items to include.

Earlier I mentioned giving a pep talk to these students. This was one of their efforts to get a portfolio program started. Although I earned the title "Mr. Portfolio Dude," my efforts did little to actually get them interested in portfolios. They were unwilling to do something simply because their teachers or anyone else wanted them to. Set standards and test to ensure they are met? Get serious! These kids were, by choice, 'out of the loop.'

But their teachers did find a way to draw them into the loop. They uncovered an article in the May, 1992 issue of *Educational Leadership* by Beth Hebert describing portfolio evening, a time when students present their portfolios to their parents. The concept is similar to the "student–led parent–teacher conferences" that originated in Canada. Hebert writes that portfolio evening "is really the children's evening, and they need to 'run the show' as much as possible. Parents and teachers have been impressed with the leadership and independence that even our youngest students have demonstrated in this setting." (Hebert, 1992, p. 61).

The teachers were fascinated with the idea and decided to give it a try at their school. They modified Hebert's approach only slightly to fit Wynne Watts' far different setting. They chose afternoon instead of evening, and changed the name to the more familiar open house.

They told the students about the open house and that they would be expected to show their portfolios to visitors. Several weeks later, invitations were sent to parents, friends, and family. In anticipation of a low parent turnout, the school's teaching staff invited the residential and the day treatment staffs to play the role of the surrogate parents. These were the people to whom many of the kids "came home" after school. In all, 37 adults attended including family members of 7 of the school's approximately 25 students.

The visitors met briefly with the teachers prior to going to the classrooms. A staff spokesperson explained that the open house was an opportunity for the students to show portfolios of their school work. The teachers encouraged the visitors to be honest but emphasized that they should tell the children if they liked what they saw. Privately, one teacher confided, "The kids are really scared — I don't know if this is going to work or not."

The event was memorable as animated discussion filled the rooms. One teacher described it like this, "I heard buzzing sounds, people talking all the time. I saw a lot of eye contact and an incredible number of smiles. Some people came in looking pretty bummed out and nervous and smiled a whole lot before it was over."

The portfolios themselves were impressive, considering that they didn't even exist a few weeks prior to the open house. Obviously the open house had provided an impetus to both student and teacher. But more was going on than just motivation.

We debriefed the kids afterwards. While the general response during the open house itself was positive, many students expressed a different opinion afterward. One group went on the attack, refusing to talk about the open house or their portfolios.

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"How can you expect us to do high school work if you give us baby work?"

"Why don't we get grades like in real school?"

The teachers judged the open house a qualified success, and scheduled a second open house three months later. The drill was the same and the only thing really different was that the kids had now been through one open house. The students were given free reign over what to put into portfolios and the open house was announced well in advance. In the classrooms, the second open house felt very different from the first. The rooms were much quieter although the intensity remained. The students acted more "in control," more ready to engage the visitors, more articulate, and more willing to talk about their portfolios and explain what was going on. I heard one student explain her portfolio to a visitor

"It's like a story. We put an old paper in and one of our last ones, it shows how we've improved."

Another showed subtraction papers from January and June, pointing out (with the pride that discovery brings) how much he had changed. This child had an IQ documented to be 70, leading his teacher to comment, "It kind of makes you wonder about the tests, doesn't it."

The debriefing also contrasted sharply with the first open house. Rather than react to the event itself as they had the first time, they tended to be more reflective, more concerned with the quality of the work they were sharing. One student said that the visitors were not critical enough,

"My mom said 'work on spelling.' She said the truth."

Another commented

"I've finally begun to learn what portfolios are about, I didn't understand last time."

The class that had complained of 'baby work' focused on the portfolio process. One said,

"Last time I didn't care, I just threw anything in. This time I had more reason for choosing."

Another said,

"It was easier this time because the first time nobody knew what was going on. It was more confusing the first time."

A boy commented,

"This portfolio took more work. I knew what I was doing this time. I had more stuff in my portfolio."

The reactions of this class deserve special comment. At the first open house, they claimed to have produced poor quality work because someone else had given them 'baby work.' But theirs was a vulnerable position with no place to hide. No one had graded or scored their portfolios. They had written the papers, filled out the work sheets, drawn the pictures, and ABOVE ALL had chosen what to show. And, when they looked into the mirror of portfolio ownership they saw poor quality — they saw 'baby work.' I suspect they began to think about the quality of their work realistically for the first time. Thus, although they tried really hard, it was difficult for them to blame someone else for the work they chose to place into their portfolios. The second time around they chose a different strategy, one in which they began to assume control. As one girl said,

"It was easier to do the reflections [this time], I had more reasons for choosing the work I put into my portfolio."

I've described two portfolio programs that illustrate the close tie between learning and assessment. The emotionally disabled students at Wynne Watts with their long histories of being victimized by their own poor choices began to realize that they could make choices that had positive consequences. In their experience assessment was something always done to them. Poor grades and test scores had nothing to do with them personally — they were from the outside, awarded by authority. These students were taking the first step in controlling quality by realizing that quality can be controlled. This may not be news to most of us, but to these kids it was a revelation.

The learning disabled students in Frazier's

class were starting from a different place. They were the rejects that the quality control procedures had kicked out. Their challenge was to overcome a history of failure by taking direct control of the quality of their work. They did this by taking charge of assessment as well as learning. They set goals, negotiated standards, and judged the quality of their work, all the things that are usually done by the evaluation department.

If I were to characterize portfolios and portfolio assessment in a single phrase, I would would echo Tierney, Carter, and Desai (1991), saying thatportfolios offers the opportunity for assessment that empowers learning rather than assessment that polices learners. I was standing on the steps of the Wynne Watts school as the visitors were leaving after the first open house. One man, a grandfather, looked at me as he passed and said, "I sure wish we had something like that when I was a kid."

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