



# Taking stock of portfolio assessment scholarship: From research to practice



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## ABSTRACT

Portfolio assessment has been extensively investigated over the past two decades. Nonetheless, its broader applications in the first and second language writing classrooms remain inadequate. This paper emphasizes that theoretical and empirical research evidence is likely to inform the classroom-based implementation of portfolio assessment. The paper first introduces the origin, definitions, rationale, applications and characteristics of portfolio assessment, and then historicizes writing portfolio assessment scholarship according to the evolving trends of portfolio assessment development in both the first and second language writing contexts. Subsequently, a method section is included concerning how the theoretical and empirical scholarship was screened, selected and categorized for review in terms of three key themes: (1) research which supports classroom applications of portfolio assessment; (2) research which inhibits classroom-based portfolio assessment practices; and (3) research that needs future investigation on how to promulgate portfolio implementation. The review is followed by three pedagogical recommendations suggesting how teachers, administrators and programme directors can better develop learning-supportive portfolio assessment practices and have maximum exposure to pertinent professional learning. It is hoped that the paper advances the portfolio assessment scholarship, predominantly with a view of using research evidence to inform classroom practices.

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## 1. Introduction

The idea of portfolios originates from disciplines including architecture, photography, performing arts, and fashion industry. In these domains, portfolios primarily serve to showcase a professional's talents and artistry via an array of exemplar works, namely the award-winning projects designed by an architect for job applications. In the field of education, portfolios are commonly viewed as a pedagogical-cum-evaluative tool adopted in the tertiary classroom settings (Belanoff & Dickson, 1991; Klenowski, 2002). Portfolios have a plethora of prototypes when used in different subject disciplines, for instance, reflective portfolios for pre-service teachers in teacher education, portfolios as licensure requirement in nursing training, and writing portfolios for university freshmen in passing the writing practicum. In this paper, we intend to review the portfolio scholarship in the context of the first language (L1) and second language (L2) writing classrooms which range from primary to university educational levels. This review distinguishes between two kinds of writing pedagogy: (1) writing-only instruction, as in most university basic composition courses, and (2) general-English instruction, where writing is only part of the curriculum, as in primary and secondary schools.

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Portfolio assessment is generally defined as dossiers kept by learners to document their efforts, growth, and achievements in the continued writing process (Genesee & Upshur, 1996). It could be used to serve formative, summative, and evaluative purposes of assessment, depending on how the portfolio approach is utilized in various educational institutions. In conventional process-oriented classrooms, portfolio assessment is considered a learning-supportive approach which constructively aligns teaching, learning and assessment of writing via provision of multiple feedback sources, use of student writing output as pedagogical input, and postponement of summative evaluation to support the learning of writing, e.g., adequate opportunities for editing and rewriting (Brown & Hudson, 1998; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996).

The rationale behind portfolio assessment is that evaluation of writing should be personalized, longitudinal and contextualized, taking place in learners' familiar classroom environments rather than being dehumanized and standardized, administering in the examination hall (Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Hamp-Lyons & Kroll, 1996). A call for more contextualized assessment practices stems from the constructivist perspective of assessment where a learner's active role in the writing process needs to be prioritized alongside the rise of process approach in L2 writing classrooms in 1990s (Murphy & Grant, 1996; Silva, 1993). Influenced by the shifting paradigm to alternative assessments in most L1 writing contexts, the use of portfolio assessment in L2 educational jurisdictions has become ubiquitous despite institutional and sociopolitical constraints including teacher autonomy, (lack of) professional training and test-driven cultures (Burner, 2014; Hamp-Lyons, 2006).

In L1 writing, challenges regarding large-scale applications of portfolio assessment are concerned with the issues of reliability and authorship, because portfolio assessment does not necessarily follow the conventional psychometric paradigm of assessment, namely standardization in test administration and scoring procedures (Gearhart & Herman, 1998; Koretz, 1998). Applied in L2 learning landscape, portfolio assessment appears to have encountered similar hurdles, for instance, (1) incongruence between the constructivist approach to assessment and product-based writing pedagogy (Lam & Lee, 2010); (2) misguided mentality that portfolio assessment is an add-on 'reform' initiative, not part of progressive writing curriculum that supports teaching and learning of writing (Hamp-Lyons, 2007); (3) impoverished language assessment training provided for serving teachers when alternative approaches to writing assessment are introduced (Hamp-Lyons, 2016).

Parallel to the constructivist perspective of assessment, the role of learner agency and the process of reflective thinking remain indispensable when describing the characteristics of portfolio assessment. Besides, Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) identified three significant stages in their model of portfolio assessment including collection, selection and reflection, which illustrate the fundamental blueprint of how portfolio assessment is operationalized at the classroom level. Within these procedures, students are encouraged to compile their interim and final drafts among other artifacts both critically and independently. Through reflection, they are expected to select the most representative works for showcasing their best abilities and achievements. These three-stage development processes are viewed as the core activities of portfolio assessment. Likewise, based upon the work of Dewey and Schön, Yancey (1998: 6) argued that reflection in portfolio assessment has three interrelated processes which entail projection (e.g., goal-setting), retrospection (e.g., review) and revision in the form of internal dialogues and rhetorical acts, increasing student awareness in learning writing through active monitoring of the writing trajectory and developing multiple perspectives to upgrade works-in-progress when revising.

Despite the importance attached to reflection, L2 writing practitioners tend not to include this significant element into their portfolio programmes or simply reduce the role of reflection to a set of mechanistic self-assessment practices which result in a ritual of communal confession and/or task compliance (Schendel & O'Neill, 1999; Torrance, 2007). These kinds of reflection would not help portfolio students successfully engage in metathinking and metadiscourse (Hamp-Lyons, 2003). Additionally, in L2 writing, students are likely to be deprived of the necessary *conditions* to reflect upon their writing owing to a lack of space (limited class time), autonomy (top-down pedagogical approaches) and support (personalized feedback), not to mention a broader cultural issue where students are usually excluded from decision-making assessment processes (Carless, 2011; Lam, 2014).

The aim of this paper is to review the state-of-the-art literature on writing portfolio assessment with a major focus on how theoretical and empirical research evidence can provide writing teachers and administrators with a window to inform their practices when they set up specific portfolio programmes. The paper is a literature-based study which intends to disseminate knowledge based upon a thorough analysis of empirical and theoretical studies which suggest illustrative and operative portfolio assessment practices for wider applications. The review begins with historicizing the evolving trends of portfolio assessment in different eras, followed by a method section describing how the literature review was analyzed regarding three running themes including research that supports portfolio assessment applications; research that inhibits classroom-based portfolio assessment; and research which remains underrepresented yet needs to be explored to promote future portfolio implementation in L2 writing environments. The review proposes three recommendations for portfolio assessment in the classroom. The paper ends with implications arguing how portfolio assessment can be used as an enabling tool to support teacher professional learning, promulgate learner agency in the assessment process, and create a learning-oriented culture to facilitate the development of self-reflective practices. Although the focus of this paper primarily surveys L2 portfolio assessment landscape, its outcomes may also be indicative of how L1 composition and assessment theories have a part to play in shaping the development of their L2 counterparts (Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Johns, 1990).

## 2. Trends in writing portfolio assessment

This section attempts to look into how portfolio assessment has been developing since its inception in early 1980s. According to Hamp-Lyons (2001, 2002), the use of writing portfolios was categorized as 'the third generation' of writing

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