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## Progressive Portfolios: A Yearlong Process of Research, Reflection, and Revision

*An English teacher and a Social Studies teacher collaborated to create a year-long progressive process of research, writing, reflection, and revision at the middle school level.*

“Portfolio Day!” I had written this with cheery colors on the day’s whiteboard agenda, colors meant to inspire positivity and perseverance, creativity and cognition. That’s a lot to expect even from the tropical pack of dry erase markers. Before first period, one of my students surveyed the agenda and asked what it meant. I wasn’t surprised, although I was pretty sure I had previewed this in every class the day before. I reminded him, gently I hope, “It means we are going to look at the last piece of writing you did, think about it and write about it, and get ready to revise it in a different way.”

“Oh!” he replied. “I thought we were done with that.”

And there’s the trouble. It’s a condition most teachers of writing are quite familiar with, the prevalent student attitude that once is most certainly enough, that revision is at best unnecessary and at worst some punishment thought up by cruel English teachers.

Months earlier, thinking about this tendency and the research work our students had been doing in our English and Social Studies classes, my colleague Tom Kelner and I had decided to design a different process, a way we hoped would not only encourage revision but also deepen research and understanding.

We had been on the same seventh grade teaching team for a few years and had started to collaborate with our two subject areas. Combining the literacy requirements of the Common Core

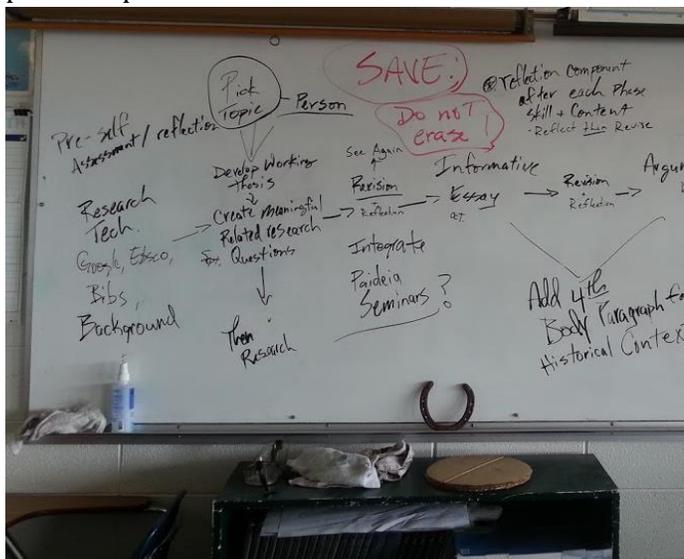
Standards with the content of both English and American History, we sought to help students practice and improve literacy skills, especially in research and writing. During our steadily growing number of research projects, we would take all of our students to the library at once and circulate among the 50+ students doing what we termed “drive-by” and “knee to knee” teaching. Between classes and after school during those projects, we would confer, reflect, and adjust our teaching for the next period or the next day. It was sometimes messy, often breathlessly busy, but always rewarding and a lot of fun for us as we watched our students engage in meaningful struggle.

The end of the school year came, and although we were largely pleased with the progress of our students, we wondered how to create a more lasting impact. Approaching the problem like we had taught our students, we developed a working thesis : integration of a common theme and a skill set that transcends all content. We realized that it wasn’t how many facts students knew about the Revolutionary War or the Jackson presidency; the most important things to instill in students were attitudes of questioning and ways of working that they could use across content and across grade levels. Historian and writer Wilfred McClay emphasized the importance of asking questions of the past and termed history, “not just an inert account of indisputable and self-explanatory details” but a “a reflective task that calls to the depths of our humanity” (2019).

## Progressive Portfolios

Questions and ideas are an important starting point, but when working with relatively novice researchers and writers, clear and concrete processes are essential.

As Tom said, it was important that they remembered “how to do the research, how to construct a paragraph, how to organize an essay.” We knew that our district’s literacy protocols and our digital tools would be instrumental in this work. Revision and reflection would be key components all year to help students recognize their growth and continue their development. This reflection also would continue to deepen the students’ relationship with history. As we often do when we brainstorm, we picked up markers and mapped out our ideas on the whiteboard. Soon, we had developed a year long plan for research, writing, and revision with an accompanying portfolio process.



Of course, these were not new ideas. Whether adopted as growth or showcase portfolios or some hybrid of the two, portfolios and portfolio assessment have been a part of writing instruction since the 1980s. Their use has fluctuated and evolved over the past three decades, but they remain part of the educational landscape, especially as digital tools have become more ubiquitous. Much like digital tools have impacted writing and research, a new horizon has emerged for portfolios, one with an enhanced focus on their instructional aspects. Technology has made it

simpler to revise and archive work, making portfolios less space- and time-consuming, but the same tenets remain, that portfolios are purposeful collections of student work with inclusion of student reflection (Danielson & Abruyton, 1997). In 1993, the National Education Association termed portfolios as a purposeful record of learning including work and reflection on that work. It is this view of portfolios to which we most closely adhered in our plan.

With our philosophical and procedural foundation in place, the enhanced collaboration initiated in social studies and English classes early in the next school year. After a student self-assessment of their current research and writing skills, students learned the basics of research. To us, the basics of research include logical search techniques, evaluating of resources, the working thesis, and writing strong research questions.

The working thesis was an essential but relatively new element for us in our work with seventh graders. Coming up with that working thesis early in the process prevented random research because students would have an idea of where their research was going. We assured students that their thesis statements could change as they analyzed the available information, but it was important to have a specific, worthy starting point.

A key digital component is that all of this information was presented digitally as well as by instructors (either the social studies teacher or the English teacher). And, crucially, all student files were kept digitally in a Social Studies and English collaboration folder in each student’s Google Drive so that it was readily accessible anywhere, anytime. We used Google Applications for Education because it was available in our district, but there are many ways to present and preserve information. Another thing we learned was the importance of being process specific rather than platform specific. In other words, we use Google Classroom because we have access to it, but other platforms could work also.

## Progressive Portfolios

After this initial mini-research, students were instructed/reminded of our CEAL paragraph protocol, a mnemonic that represents the structure of a paragraph: claim, evidence, analysis, and leaving thought. We created this protocol in our Kalispell school district in 2012, and students use it across the curriculum in grades 6-12. It has been an essential building block in our literacy work for the last seven years. Students wrote CEAL paragraphs on a common topic to practice the research and writing skills.

A few weeks later, students chose from a list of people important to American history from the time of the explorers to the Civil War. That time frame was selected because it is the period covered in American History in seventh grade in our district. We decided to use people as our topics, because that was concrete enough for all levels of learners to grasp and yet could go deep enough to challenge even our most accomplished and motivated students. Students wrote another CEAL paragraph using this topic and additional research. Importantly, all the research questions throughout the year focus on how and why and importance. After a few weeks in which other curriculum work was happening in both ELA and Social Studies, students revisited those CEAL paragraphs in a “Reflect, then Revise” session. This was the first of several designated “portfolio days.” Providing that directed time was essential; expecting students to complete portfolio work independently wasn’t realistic for our students. The idea was stressed that we were going to preserve and use their research and writing work all year, but they were going to continually renew and revise that work. Inside their Social Studies and English Collaboration Folder, we directed them to create a Portfolio folder.

The original paragraphs were deposited here and labeled “original CEAL paragraph.” Then students made a digital copy to revise. They looked at their paragraphs and scores and considered how to write more meaningful research questions and/or stronger paragraphs. They wrote guided

reflections on the process so far and then wrote new drafts.

Immediately following their reflections and new drafts, and this was in November, students launched into an informative essay using the same topic and the same research notes from their CEAL paragraphs on the topic. CEAL paragraphs were still used for the body, but we then taught the protocols that govern introductions and conclusions. In this way, we reinforced the idea that revision is about global changes. Paragraphs were added; transitions between paragraphs were created.

After that, students were given time to add a research question and additional research about the historical context of their person. We call this (but we’re pretty sure we didn’t make this up) horizontal history. An example would be how the French revolution was going on during the same time as the United States constitution was being formed and ratified. Or, as the student who researched Prince Henry the Navigator learned that his work with navigation lead directly to the slave trade. After this, students revised again, making sure the new information fit and that appropriate transitions built bridges from one idea to the next. Informative essays were also saved into the students’ digital portfolio folders along with a reflection on a later portfolio day. Planning for ample directed class time for these portfolio days was new for us, but a necessary part of the process. It’s the next part that represented a new vision of revision. A few weeks later, using the same topic, students did more research to discover something controversial about their person. That controversial aspect was then incorporated into an argumentative essay. This essay followed the same accordion structure as the informative with the addition of argumentative elements such as opposing viewpoints and a re-crafted thesis. Powerful lessons for students were that they could use much of the same research for multiple purposes and that they could focus their research in a particular direction. We encouraged students to literally make a new copy of their informative

## Progressive Portfolios

essays and see what they could keep and what they needed to delete or change. Parts of their essays changed a lot with entirely new sections, but some changed just a little with rearranging or different wording, and some passages didn't change much at all.

When students did their reflection on this part of the process, they spoke to its power. Writing and research were seeming less isolated and task oriented and more systematic and procedural. We believed this was fulfilling our own working thesis: the integration of a common theme and skill set that transcends all content.

Later in the school year, students looked at their topics (people) horizontally again, but rather than looking at other historical events, they looked at events or discoveries in the areas of mathematics, science, and the arts that were in some way connected to their people. For example, students discovered that Mark Twain was writing while Susan B. Anthony was working for suffrage and commented on her efforts. This also was researched and included in a revised essay. Because all research and drafts were always saved digitally, the students' body of work and level of expertise were constantly expanding.

Near the end of the school year, students completed a major reflection about their writing and research skills throughout the school year. Digital resources were utilized here as well. The students had all of their research notes and all of their drafts in their Google Drive, and their teachers gave them a Google Slides template as a starting point to create a presentation demonstrating their conclusions about their historical figures. If you want to scare a seventh grader, assign a presentation that he or she has to deliver in front of 100 classmates!



During those presentations, all of their teachers were scoring using a Google form. With this tool, scores were completed and compiled while the presentations were underway. Practically speaking, the transfer of scores to the gradebook was also pretty seamless. While students listened to the presentations about these important figures in American history, they were taking some notes and, to some degree at least, communicating support to their classmates. At the end, the students drew a collective sigh of relief and in reflection noted how they were proud of what they had accomplished and how future presentation tasks would feel less intimidating.

As we did our own reflecting about the year, we agreed that the portfolio process we had created was a way to imbue standards and content with meaning. Both students and teachers had a more complete vision of research, writing, and revision to inform future work. Further, we realized that even more reflection and revision by the students and the teachers would help achieve our goals and considered ways to make that happen. In the same way we were asking students to reflect and revise and build upon their previous work, our own professional collaboration gave us

Progressive Portfolios

the platform to reflect upon and revise our teaching practice.

It's an important lesson in history, English, or teaching or any other pursuit: any work can be a work in progress.

**References**

Danielson, Charlotte, and Leslye Abrutyn. *Introduction to Using Portfolios in the Classroom*. ASCD, 1997.

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