

# Using Phenomenal Changes – Stories of Participants in the Portfolio Project

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I have been thinking a lot about coming up with a better model of portfolio assessment in our school so we can be more consistent with the process. In the past, I would always come to the same wall that I have with authentic assessment: you can't force people to do it if they don't have a full understanding of the process. To truly implement any type of authentic assessment, people need to buy into the concept.

But how do you accomplish that when there just doesn't seem to be enough time to nurture the process? It seemed serendipitous that I was asked to review Phenomenal Changes – Stories of Participants in the Portfolio Project for Adventures in Assessment as it allowed me to focus on how to get both me and the teachers at the International Language Institute (ILI) of MA in Northampton more involved in improving how we do portfolio assessment at the school.

(This is the first of a two-part article as we won't finish our project until the next Adventures in Assessment is out; we all know that Authentic Assessment is an ongoing project.)

Phenomenal Changes – Stories of Participants in the Portfolio Project is an excellent staff development tool for portfolio development. At the ILI, we are using the text as a springboard for discussions about portfolio assessment.

The articles in Phenomenal Changes — a series of interviews with the participants of the project and the Project Director Melody Schneider — are very reader friendly. The text is divided into five areas: ABE, ESOL, Literacy Councils, Compensatory Education, and Administrators.

We have been using several different variations of authentic assessment tools at the International Language Institute over the years. At a recent staff meeting I asked the teachers how it was going with portfolio assessment in their classes. The teachers replied that they have the students using dialogue journals and learning journals and that they had been collecting things, but they didn't really feel as if they had a handle on the concept of portfolios. We agreed portfolios could take many forms, but that the group needed a model with which we all felt comfortable. I brought out Phenomenal Changes and asked if they would be interested in reading about the experiences of other teachers working on portfolio assessment. They were very interested, so we agreed to read and discuss articles for the next five weeks. During curriculum week at the end of the program we would put together all our ideas and develop criteria for portfolio selection and review. We plan to put our findings into place for the program that begins in January.

We decided to begin our weekly meetings with 30 minutes dedicated to portfolio assessment discussion. (Weekly meetings usually last an hour and a half and include both part-time and full-time staff.) The 30-minute segment would be divided into three steps. First, we would discuss our reactions to an article. Second, we would discuss how this article would/wouldn't relate to our program. Third, we would establish some action plans to implement in the next month or during curriculum week. Since the staff are ESL teachers, we started off with the two articles in the text that discussed portfolio assessment with ESL teachers.

The first comment that came up the following week at our first discussion was that everyone would have preferred the articles to be actually written by the writer and that vernacular usage was a bit difficult to read. We agreed that Melody Schneider does a good job of letting the reader hear the project participant's voice. One teacher said she would have liked more information about the contents of a portfolio and more nuts and bolts about the end product. A discussion ensued about how we could look at lists that have been prepared by other people, but would that help find our own way of doing portfolio assessment? We agreed that not having the "nuts and bolts" up front enabled us to look at portfolio assessment without being directed as to what we should be doing. This discussion led to asking, 'what should we be

putting in the portfolios?' One teacher said that, since her students were only in class six hours a week, how about including things that the students accomplished outside class?

Another teacher commented that the articles really helped her realize that she needs to get out of her students' way. She felt that she was holding their hands too much and that they needed to "experience" something rather than having her always telling them what to do.

We also talked about the dialogue journals that our students keep. Some students write a lot and "play" with the language, using what they have learned in class while others write the same thing every week: 'I went to church and cleaned my house.' How can we show students their progress if they write the same things week after week?

Our discussion led to considering ways students can see their progress through guided writing, writing with a specific task, and making the writing process interesting for students. We also ended up sharing a writing tool called Fundex of Individualized Activities for English Language Practice\* that the teachers weren't previously aware of and became very excited to discover.

The teachers acknowledge that both students and teachers need to understand why we're doing portfolio assessment. "I need to understand why we're doing this. How do I encourage it to be taken seriously? How do I motivate?" We admitted that we as teachers should also be keeping portfolios about our teaching practices.

Included in our portfolios would be our own Learning Journals (a booklet of week-ly assessment tools kept by the students (see Adventures in Assessment, Volume 5, "Evolution of an Assessment Tool"). These would be completed in class while our students were filling out their own Learning Journals. One teacher said her students might take portfolio assessment more seriously if they saw her taking it seriously.

Naturally, we went over the allotted 30 minutes. At the end of the meeting we did feedback about using the articles as a springboard for discussion and all the teachers were enthusiastic: "There were a lot of things that I got from these articles," "I like making time to do this," and "It's kind of nice to have an academic focus in our meeting, rather than just going over the attendance list."

As I listened and participated in the meeting, I realized that we are all stakeholders in the process and that we have to realize that authentic assessment is a change of practice for everyone: teachers, students and administrators.

I also realized that a variety of people interested in portfolio assessment could use Phenomenal Changes – Stories of Participants in the Portfolio Project. The readings are just as useful for people just starting out as for people that have been doing it for a while.

We left our meeting excited and armed with two more articles for the next week. We don't know exactly how our portfolio system will be in January, but at this point I feel strongly that with the consistency of the weekly meetings about portfolio assessment and using Phenomenal Changes, there will be some phenomenal changes of how we all look at portfolio assessment at ILI.