

The Portfolio Exchange

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The Practice

Once per week students are randomly assigned to groups of four for discussion of a list of questions relevant to the week's assigned readings. To insure that students are ready to participate in the discussion a brief multiple-choice quiz on the readings precedes the discussion. Following the discussion, each student chooses one of the discussion items and writes a one-page response to it outside of class.

Week by week students add responses to their portfolios which they eventually submit to the instructor near the end of the course. The instructor randomly redistributes the portfolios to class members with the instruction to provide comments to their authors based on an accompanying set of guidelines. The guidelines emphasize commenting on how well the portfolio authors have succeeded in connecting course concepts to the items under discussion and on interesting ways in which the authors might extend their responses. Students are encouraged to revise items in their portfolio, based on the comments received, prior to submitting it for final assessment by the instructor. The most interesting aspect of the exchange is that it is as often the review of another student's work and the process of commenting on it which leads to portfolio revisions as it is the comments received on one's own portfolio.

Guiding Principles Behind the Practice

1. Assignments which encourage students to review previous material in different contexts as the course develops will enhance opportunities for a meaningful integration of the course elements.
2. Asking questions within a supporting structure about the work of others can be of great value in learning to apply those questions in one's own work.

Sources of Inspiration or Influence for the Practice

The practice of structured discussion groups preceded by quizzes was developed earlier with Ron Sheese in Educational Psychology courses at York University. Following up the discussion with a written response was inspired by a desire to encourage students to formalize some of their thoughts from the session. The portfolio exchange grew out of the instructor's insight that he himself was learning a great deal from commenting on and asking questions about the portfolios--in fact, it seemed exactly the kind of learning activity in which his students should be engaged. The feedback guidelines were inspired in part by a similar practice in collaborative writing groups designed to keep reviewers focused on useful feedback within their competence (reference). They were also inspired by the educational psychology concept of scaffolding (reference), the concept of maintaining cognitive support for students as they engage in complex learning activities. The content of the feedback guidelines was written by Latika Nirula and based in Bruning, Schraw and Ronning's (1998) summary of Calfee's (1994) CORE model of instruction.

Frequently Asked Questions About the Practice and Responses

1. Is there some reason to wait until the end of the course to conduct the portfolio exchange?

No, this decision was made for practical reasons within the course but even more benefit might be gained from a series of exchanges.

2. Are the discussion groups an essential feature of the portfolio exchange?

No, they are the setting used in this course, but the items in the portfolio could be questions at the end of a chapter, homework exercises, questions raised in class discussion, etc. One valuable feature of the discussion groups, however, given a focus on the integration of course concepts was that the instructor could insure that the discussion items offered progressively increasing scope for building on concepts introduced earlier.

For More Information (Reference and Links)

For a discussion of peer evaluation and collaboration in the writing process see:

Flower, L. (1993). [Problem-solving Strategies for Writing](#) (4th Edition). Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, pp. 115-117.

For more about the concept of scaffolding see:

Rosenshine, B. and Meister, C. (1992). The use of scaffolds for teaching higher-level cognitive strategies. *Educational Leadership*, 49(7), pp. 26-33.

Calfee's acronym CORE refers to four aspects of peer interaction that enhance knowledge and understanding - connecting, organizing, reflecting and extending.

The CORE model of instruction is briefly summarized in the context of promoting reflective classroom discussions by:

Bruning, R., Schraw, G., & Ronning, R. (1999). [Cognitive Psychology and Instruction](#) (3rd Edition). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill, Prentice Hall, p. 227.

The CORE model is described in more detail in:

Calfee, R., Dunlap, K., & Wat, A. (1994). Authentic discussion of texts in middle grade schooling: An analytic narrative approach. *Journal of Reading*, (37), pp. 546-556.

Example of [weekly discussion questions](#).

Example of [feedback guidelines](#) used by the students.