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Portfolios and Flow

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Nurturing Student Engagement

LIKE MANY LITERACY EDUCATORS, I AM AN ADVOCATE AND USER OF portfolios. I use portfolios in all the classes that I teach: an undergraduate English course on young adult literature, a methods course for prospective secondary English educators, and a graduate seminar on English education. My approach to portfolios is slightly different in each of these classes. In my undergraduate literature course, students choose two writing projects to develop and then share with me the evolution of their work in the form of a final portfolio. In my methods course, students work collaboratively using computers to produce an electronic portfolio that represents their collective knowledge, interest, and ability with regard to the teaching of English. In my graduate seminar, students write a fifteen- to twenty-page research paper that they then submit to me in a final portfolio that contains the various materials they accumulated in undertaking their project. Within these different approaches, there are similarities. In all of my courses, students share writing with one another and revise their writing using the feedback they receive from peers and from me; this process of feedback and revision is always documented in the final portfolio. Additionally, all portfolios contain an introduction and a reflective conclusion. In their reflective conclusions, students comment on their experiences as writers, assess their achievements, and speculate as to their future goals and activities.

In developing a rationale for my portfolio pedagogy, I have drawn primarily from recent scholarship in composition theory and practice. Persuaded by composition teachers and researchers that students need time, ownership, and constructive feedback in order to improve their writing (Calkins 1983; Knoblauch and Brannon 1984; Atwell 1987; Goswami and Stillman 1987), I have used portfolios to nurture student engagement in writing practice, revision, and self-evaluation. Believing with these same teachers and researchers that it is important to evaluate holistically the quality of my students' writing and to examine my own teaching, I have used portfolios to obtain insight into my students' writing processes and to reflect upon the nature of my writing assignments and teaching practices. As do Steve Zemelman, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde, I have conceived portfolios as an excellent means of achieving "best practice" in writing instruction (Zemelman et al. 1993).

Flow

Recently, however, the work of the educational psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has begun to inform my thinking. In his various books, Csikszentmihalyi develops the notion of "flow," or a subjective state in which a person is "completely involved in something to the point of *losing track of time and of being unaware of fatigue and of everything else but the activity itself*" (Csikszentmihalyi 1993, 14—italics added). Csikszentmihalyi's research suggests that there is a strong relationship between learning and flow; when people are involved in an activity so deeply that they lose all awareness of time and fatigue, they report higher levels of enjoyment, concentration, and psychic complexity than in other situations (Csikszentmihalyi 1993, 15-16). Consequently, Csikszentmihalyi argues that educators ought to foster the conditions that nurture flow in classroom environments. Clear goals, immediate and unambiguous feedback, and a balance between opportunities for action and abilities to act all contribute significantly, explains Csikszentmihalyi, to the achievement of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1993, 14). Csikszentmihalyi emphasizes that fostering such conditions is not easy. Teachers must be passionate about learning, attentive to the conditions that enhance the experience of intrinsic rewards, and attentive to the shifting needs of students (Csikszentmihalyi 1993, 190-193). He also suggests that individual personality, social environment, and family life will constrain any

teacher's effort to engage students in flow in school (Csikszentmihalyi 1993, 6-8).

Optimal Learning and a Critical Lens

Csikszentmihalyi's notion of flow seems to me important for teachers using portfolios in two different ways. On the one hand, Csikszentmihalyi's ideas about the conditions that produce optimal learning provide an additional theoretical justification for teaching with portfolios in literacy classrooms. Features of portfolio pedagogy that I perceive as significant—giving students opportunities to select topics and forms for writing, providing repeated opportunities for peer and teacher feedback, and inviting students to evaluate their work—all potentially coincide with or nurture the conditions that Csikszentmihalyi claims are crucial to the achievement of flow. Giving students choice in their writing enhances the likelihood that they perceive clear goals and a balance between their abilities and their opportunities for action. Providing repeated opportunities for peer and teacher feedback diminishes the likelihood of miscommunication about goals and expectations. Inviting students to evaluate their work also can clarify goals and can provide teachers with an important opportunity to attend to the shifting needs of students. While I am not so naive as to believe that a portfolio pedagogy can guarantee the creation of the sort of intensely focused learning environment that Csikszentmihalyi envisions, I do believe that a carefully and flexibly enacted portfolio pedagogy can contribute in important ways to meaningful and inspired student learning.

Csikszentmihalyi's notion of flow also can provide portfolio teachers with a valuable critical lens through which to reflect upon their teaching. As I just indicated, attempts to involve students meaningfully in writing through portfolios do not always meet with success. Recently, for example, one of my students completely ignored my feedback on her essay and submitted it unrevised, and with only a cursory reflective conclusion, in her final portfolio. Another student declined to submit any portfolio at all. In these and similar instances, Csikszentmihalyi's notion of flow helps me to interrogate my teaching. Were these students confused by the complexity of my portfolio pedagogy? Was there an imbalance between their abilities and the opportunities for writing and revision that I organized in my classroom? Did I miss an opportunity or somehow fail in my effort to clarify my goals and expectations? Did factors of which I was unaware impinge upon my students' ability to succeed in my course? Did additional factors constrain

my own ability to create a nurturing classroom environment? While these questions do not always yield firm answers, they do help me to consider the complicated nature of the context in which I teach. They help me to examine *how* I enact my portfolio pedagogy, and perhaps even to plan new ways of situating myself in relation to my students.

For me, this is the real value of Csikszentmihalyi's work. From within the conventional conceptual framework of portfolio pedagogy (i.e., composition studies), it sometimes is easy to forget the complexity of what is involved in making any pedagogical method function meaningfully in a classroom setting. An awareness of the conditions that nurture active learning can help portfolio advocates to see beyond the exigencies of pedagogical method. With a knowledge of these conditions, literacy educators can ask critical questions: Are the goals of my portfolio pedagogy understood by my students? Do my goals intersect in a meaningful way with my students' assumptions and interests? Do I engage my students in repeated conversation about our shared goals and methods? Is there a balance between abilities and opportunities for action in my classroom environment?

These assumptions—that portfolios facilitate the creation of an optimal learning environment, and that flow theory and research can provide portfolio pedagogues with a critical lens upon their teaching—were confirmed by a paper I heard at the NCTE-sponsored conference "Portfolios, Reflection, and Teacher Research." Lauren Sewell, then a graduate student at the University of Louisville, pointed out that the professional literature on portfolios rarely speaks to the difficulties inherent in teaching with portfolios. Sewell suggested that this lack of critical perspective could very well undermine efforts to advance portfolio pedagogies. By way of example, Sewell told a story about an orientation for beginning teaching assistants in the composition program at her university. During this orientation, Sewell and other members of a portfolio reading group enthusiastically shared insights about portfolios that they had gleaned from their reading and teaching. However, after the orientation was over, Sewell and her colleagues discovered that many of the orientation participants had characterized their session as "preaching" and "indoctrination" in written evaluations. This feedback, Sewell explained, had awakened her to the shortcomings of a professional discourse that celebrates portfolios without acknowledging problems. Sewell concluded her talk by challenging her audience to devise better ways of introducing portfolios to beginning and/or skeptical literacy educators.

Sewell's presentation produced a series of reflections that eventually led me to the insights regarding portfolios and flow that I outlined above.

Immediately, I thought about Csikszentmihalyi's notion of flow and how the conditions that nurture it must have been missing in Sewell and her colleagues' session on portfolios. I speculated as to the reasons for this—did the participants in this session share the same goals as Sewell and her colleagues? Did the orientation organizers devote time before the orientation to obtaining feedback on the proposed goals, content, and methods of the various orientation sessions? In the session on portfolios, were the participants able to perceive an intersection between their abilities and what they were being advised to do as literacy educators? From my position in the rear of the conference room, it seemed to me that these types of questions could help Sewell to develop a critical perspective in relation to the apparent miscommunication that took place in her and her colleagues' session on portfolios.

Having made this connection between Csikszentmihalyi's ideas and Sewell's narrative about a problematic orientation to portfolios, I began to think about what seemed to me the obvious contrast between the presentation that I had just heard and the session on portfolios that Sewell had described in her talk. In contrast to the session that she had described, Sewell's conference presentation was an exemplary model of how to talk about portfolios when addressing other literacy educators. Sewell's talk had was extremely clear in terms of its goals, and Sewell invited feedback from her audience. Her use of storytelling techniques and her explicit focus on the difficulties involved in working with portfolios created a context where I could perceive an intersection between my abilities and what Sewell was inviting me to consider. I began to think that perhaps Csikszentmihalyi's ideas could help literacy educators not only to reflect on good ways of speaking to one another in professional contexts, but also to interrogate and explain the nature of their portfolio pedagogies.

Fostering an Intense Involvement in Learning

The insight that I obtained at that moment has remained with me to this day. A portfolio ought not to be conceived as solely a tool or a series of strategies that literacy educators employ in order to nurture and evaluate student writing. A portfolio also should be thought of as a creative means of fostering a classroom environment in which an intense involvement in learning can occur. An awareness of the conditions that nurture flow can help literacy educators be sensitive to the multiple ways in which their portfolio pedagogy might serve this end. Additionally, this awareness

can enable the interrogation of those situations where portfolio pedagogy does not work, or does not work as well as one would like. Problems with portfolio pedagogy never lie in the idea of a portfolio itself; instead, they lie in the complex relations between our students, our classroom environment, and our enactment of our portfolio pedagogy. It is this point that Csikszentmihalyi's work makes most clear, and that I hope readers of this essay take with them into their future teaching.