Literature Review

Over the last 30 years, research has been produced supporting the interest and benefits of portfolio-based assessment. No two students share identical values or interests, and the same goes for portfolios. Portfolios are defined variously as cultural artifacts, as collection devices, as instruments of process, as tools, as a means of education reform, as resources for teachers, as pictures of and guide for curriculum (Yancey, 1992, p. 12). Portfolios have dramatically changed the ways writing instructors evaluate a student's work, but have they changed the way a student feels about assessment?

Unlike most academic courses, the primary focus of a first-year composition program is building confidence in one's own ability to think critically and reflect on one's own learning experience - the foundation for powerful writers (WPA, 2014). In this sense that a portfolio is more than a writing cache following the student around, portfolios present students an opportunity to reflect on and express what students valued, struggled with, etc. with each assignment and the overall course. Though assignment/course outcome statements provide insight into what students should know post-completion, but not to what students *actually* took away. By reserving in-class time for mandatory peer-review sessions, instructors are building a community amongst the class, giving students a chance to build their confidence in not only their own writing ability but their ability to evaluate and provide constructive criticism to others.

Defining a Portfolio

For clarity's sake, the term portfolio will be defined as a purposeful compilation of student writing over a definite period of time, such as a semester or quarter (Baker, 1993). An instructor typically guides this process and throughout the development of the student showcase, offers feedback while encouraging student's peers to do the same to emphasize the collaborative nature of writing and composition. Choosing a portfolio-based structure over the base-conventional mindset of "step 1, create a draft and, 2, revise based on markup" allows a student to clearly map their individual progress over a condensed time frame. Peter Elbow wrote about the necessity for portfolio-based instruction within a composition classroom with Pat Belanoff in *New methods in college writing programs: Theories in practice:* "…In ways that…reflect the complexities of the writing process: with time for freewriting, planning, discussion with instructors and peers, revising and copy editing" (Elbow and Belanoff, 1986, p. 104).

As Elbow and Belanoff assert, the greatest asset a composition teacher can provide their students is time not only for creation but also for reflection on a portfolio's progress and how they can exercise meta-cognition to think about how their writing processes impact academic and professional growth. Similarly, this review will examine literature as it impacts the student's educational experience through metrics like assessment as well as peer feedback. Being collaborative in nature, the author of a portfolio *is* the

student, but also a product of receiving feedback, advice, etc. with the instructor and other students (Yancy, 1992, p. 104).

Early Impressions on Portfolio-based Assessment

The integration of portfolio evaluation into the composition course provided a method for professors to step away from an instructor mindset and take on a role similar to an editor who did not nitpick mistakes, but rather, guides the development of complex content. Leaning on Kenneth Burke's language, Kathleen Yancy explains that a portfolio acts as a frame, enabling new insights, ones that are less likely and sometimes impossible to discover without the frame (1992, p. 104). In Nancy Westrich Baker's study, "The Effect of Portfolio-Based Instruction on Composition Students' Final Examination Scores, Course Grades, and Attitudes Toward Writing", two types of instruction were examined: A portfolio-based and standard process approach and how each impacted the students' grades, final exam scores and overall attitudes toward the craft of writing (Baker, 1993). The study consisted of two groups of five college freshman composition classes who reflected upon their experiences with compositional writing during the spring 1991 semester at Southeast Missouri State University (Baker, 1993). The students wrote about their initial feelings before the start of the study and, upon completion, crafted a post-study reflection.

At the conclusion of the trial, students sat for a final exam, which was an essay-based response. Baker identified a noticeable relationship between a final evaluation of student portfolios and course grades and final exam scores, and, overall, students responded positively to a portfolio-based course design (1993). McCelland asserted that the use of portfolios encouraged revision more than a process-based approach: "gave students that what they were doing was real; they began to talk and think as writers" (1991, p. 167). While Jeff Sommers stated that: "The portfolio itself tends to encourage students to revise because it suggests that writing occurs over time, not in a single sitting, just as the portfolio itself grows over time and cannot be created in a single sitting" (1991, p. 153).

Baker's study distinguished itself from previous trials because instead of only measuring student attitudes toward portfolio creation, she specifically measured whether the difference in a portfolio-based approach compared to a conventional process approach accounted for notable differences in final grades (Baker, 1993). Ironically, the study focused critically on a process that is typically not measured by grades or other indicators of academic performance. In doing so, noted the benefits of a portfolio as a means of assessment instead of solely a showcase for development. Though the study did not come to a definitive conclusion regarding the link between student attitudes toward portfolios and performance, it did reveal valuable student feedback. As Baker noted: "One student stated that the portfolio '…gives students a feeling of accomplishment.' Another student commented that he 'felt more confident in what he wrote.' The improved classroom environment created by the portfolios was mentioned by one student who wrote that the portfolio method '…provided a more relaxed atmosphere for me to write inn'" (Baker, 1993).

The student feedback tended to agree with expert opinion that portfolio-based strategies typically make students feel like they are growing, developing, and being offered meaningful guidance instead of being subjected to graded assessments. Students discussed the participating professors' flexibility with grading requirements, with one remarking that as long as an instructor believed they had completed the requisite work, no student would receive below a "C" (Baker, 1993). One student elaborated on the impact of portfolio-based a, "'I think the portfolio method helps students out. Instead of receiving a bad grade on a paper, a student has a chance to revise their paper'" (Baker, 1993). These isolated statements comprised a larger group of 90% of students who emphatically responded 'yes' to a question of whether professors should continue using a portfolio as a device to evaluate and teach reading (Baker, 1993). Though the quantitative results of Baker's study were fairly inconclusive, the qualitative data of student feedback speaks volumes to the effectiveness of a portfolio-based assessment.

Criticisms of Portfolio-based Assessment

One concern this thesis may discover is that the diversity in portfolio pedagogy makes it difficult to be taught by teachers and understood by students. Catharine Lucas indicates, though this may not be fatal to portfolio assessment, it could reduce the benefits advertised to students by making the process too open, and too foundationless (Yancey, 1992, p. 4). Yuerong Liu conducted an analysis of portfolio-based assessment in an ESL classroom where one subject describes how he came to understand the English composition equivalent of a portfolio through a previous university experience: " 'I guess I made a portfolio in that class. One semester. Actually, I don't know whether I can call it a "portfolio." I just put everything I have done and gave the file as like a profile, a finished product'" (Liu, 2003, p. 128). Though this is, by some means, a portfolio, it lacks reflection that portfolio assessment relies on to separate it from competency-based assessment.

Sommers asserted that portfolio content generation can spiral out of control due to the multi-genre, page, and scope of the task (1991). Norman Allen, wrote, in his article "Product or Process? Perspective on Portfolio Assessment in Community College Composition" that in order to provide unbiased feedback, professors often delegate reading tasks to another faculty member within the department, which could often be a logistical nightmare (2016). Annemarie Hamlin provided insight into the often-taxing practice: "It was a full day of reading, and reading multiple portfolios. It also raised tensions between people with different values and different grading systems. 'You'd give that an 'A?' I'd give it a 'C.' Those tensions didn't bode well for a long-standing program" (Allen, 2016). However, portfolio-based assessment involves more collaboration among department members than if these individuals were to independently score knowledge assessments.

Edward White wrote *The Scoring of Writing Portfolios: Phase 2* that there is a need to get away from holistic grading to a new scoring methodology that can appropriately respond to and reflect the nature of portfolios (2005). The first part of White's proposal includes creating a list of goals (an assignment sheet) for this assignment. Using this list

as a guide, students are then responsible for the second part of the proposal, the student's reflection arguing that those goals were met and how. Kathleen Yancey infers that most of us do not mind sharing our success stories, but we are not always so open about sharing or acknowledging our failures to others (1992, p. 17). With the portfolio process being so heavy on collaboration, assuring students they are in a safe space and establishing guidelines on good etiquette. Despite the warranted criticisms of a portfolio-based assessment approach, Baker (1993)'s study demonstrated that, overall, both students and professors agree that it is a viable and effective approach, preferable to a competency-based assessment.

Criticisms of A Competency-based Education

Though a competency-based or process-based education is thought to be the gold standard that a portfolio-based assessment inevitably deviates from. In their book, *Critical Issues in Competency Based Education*, authors Susan V. Monjan and Suzanne M. Gassner investigate fundamental issues of what has become the standard educational framework. Instead of creating a merit-based system where students demonstrate competency through extensive critical thinking, by establishing and then holding students accountable to an overwhelming amount of guidelines, the competency-based system encourages students to achieve certain standards rather than retain knowledge (Monjan and Gassner, 1979). Whereas a portfolio-based assessment reveals students' creative and critical thought processes by reducing the specificity of requirements, a competency-based system hinders these faculties by expecting all students regardless of race, gender or experience to adhere to the same educational standard (Monjan and Gassner, 1979). The authors suggest that conventional assessment-based models are a matter of convenience because knowledge-based, multiple-choice tests are inherently reliable and unlikely to cause any controversy or provoke unrelated or challenging thought processes, which do not require a teacher to grade based on anything other than a predetermined, meticulously created answer key (Monjan and Gassner, 1979). However, since the scope of these tests is limited, the results are often subject to only a small sample of a student's ability and do not necessarily convey overall competence (Monjan and Gassner, 1979).

Another potential con of knowledge-based assessments lies in the expertise of those administering such examinations. If a teacher makes a mistake on an answer key, which admittedly happens, then even those who applied the correct critical thinking pattern to reach such a conclusion are still, in the eyes of the test creator objectively wrong and, therefore, judged to be apparently incompetent (Monjan and Gassner, 1979). Additionally, most educators create, administer and evaluate a test but miss a crucial step in the process: Reflection. Most students cram and study to take a test and then expel most of what they've learned, while instructors exhibit the same short-term memory as they prepare for the next exam. This could be the cause of most education programs being associated with abstract knowledge. Portfolios largely differ because they can allow students the opportunity to engage in reflection while students and teachers are actively engaged on a recurring basis - sharing input with one another (Camp, 1993, p. 205). One special importance in a portfolio pedagogy includes

reflection and inquiry (Yancy, 1992, pg 15). Students are in a position where they can explain their experience during the creation of each artifact and the portfolio itself.

For teachers who take the time to review answers that the majority of a class answered incorrectly, there is, arguably some learning value to a competency-based approach to composition. If these professors not only go over the answers but then instruct their students to retain their old tests in preparation for a cumulative exam that will include old test questions, there is greater value to what once amounted to a sheet full of bubbles and blank spaces. Given the limitations of a competency-based educational approach, a portfolio-based assessment fulfills the crucial needs of the instructor and student dialogue as well as providing insight into one's individual learning processes. Therefore, portfolio-based approaches have improved in composition and grown scope because of the diverse backgrounds of the participants (authors, peers, instructors, process, etc.) and technology.

Challenges Of Homogeneous vs. Heterogeneous Portfolio Development

While a portfolio approach differs from an assessment approach, there are similar distinctions between types of portfolio. There is the conventional cumulative portfolio comprised entirely of carefully revised student drafts. However, there is also what is known as a heterogeneous portfolio, which combines pre-written and revised drafts with impromptu, timed assessments (Principe, 2010). In her study "Variations in Assessment, Variations in Philosophy: Unintended Consequences of Heterogeneous Portfolios," Anne Del Principe (2010) argues that teachers attempting to create an entirely holistic assessment of student writing portfolios is highly unlikely because professors will unconsciously and inevitably weigh one student's work against another's or the individual components of a portfolio against itself rather than the work as a whole.

By having students include the contemporaneous writing assignments in addition to pre-selected excerpts department motivations include:

- Having an example of what students can authentically create on their own (without peer feedback),
- To have an example of a different style of writing compared to others,
- Attempt to reduce plagiarism within the essays,
- And to provide practice for upcoming standardized tests (Principe, 2010).

However, Principe soon observed that professors ultimately grade the impromptu and revised writings disproportionately (Principe, 2010).

Principe utilized a questionnaire experimental design to conduct this study. The sample population included 29 of her fellow English professors teaching 39 sections of composition responsible for assessing approximately 780 portfolios (Principe, 2010). The questionnaire prompted respondents to describe their typical process of handling a portfolio and how they delegate their time as well as the order in which they read submissions. Respondents claimed that they took as little as one minute to as long as

five days to properly assess a heterogeneous portfolio (Principe, 2010). Half of the participants said they take less than ten minutes to assess a portfolio, while the other half claimed they dedicated 45 minutes to evaluate each work sample (Principe, 2010). Principe ultimately organized these instructors into two distinct categories: Fast and slow, respectively.

Interestingly, Principe discovered the 'fast' instructors put more weight on the in-class impromptu essay, while the 'slow' instructors placed a greater emphasis on the revised essays (2010). Principe ultimately concluded that the heart of the issue is not whether to use a homogeneous or heterogeneous portfolio model, but for instructors to come to some agreement on what truly counts as student writing. Some respondents claimed that in-class writing is more authentic because it is not influenced by revision or peer feedback while others consider choices made during the revision process as a better indicator of one's ability to think and function like a writer (Principe, 2010). Principe's work demonstrated the conflicting underlying battles of pedagogy which influences how a professor evaluates not only student writing but also the medium in which they present their work.

While Baker presented student reactions, Principe's questionnaire is equally insightful in gathering information on how professors can be influenced by bias and how there is no universal standard for approaching the compilation or evaluation of writing portfolios. Unlike Principe's survey, Baker evaluated students at three distinct intervals: Before a course started, at the midpoint, and then at the conclusion of the course. Principe may have gathered a different qualitative result if she had made her presented prompts more open-ended and assessed colleagues at several intervals.

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