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Portfolios in a Journalism Class

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of a four-month experiment in using a portfolio assessment system in a high school journalism class. In this study, I sought to determine whether or not this type of assessment would lead to a student-produced newspaper of greater overall quality through clearer expectations, transparency in the grading process, and increased timeliness of staff members' submission of work. The success of this study was determined primarily through information gathered from student surveys, interviews, and observation. The experiment indicated that portfolios do provide a beneficial organizational structure that contributes to a higher-quality, more current newspaper. The research question: Can using a portfolio assessment system in my newspaper class increase the publication's quality?

Introduction

The role of the high school journalism teacher and newspaper adviser is so unique as to evade many attempts at definition until one has experienced it firsthand. As a first-year adviser without formal training in journalistic style, graphic design, ethics, or even the management of a group of creative, dramatic adolescents, I faced a considerable challenge. My primary obstacle was a dearth of knowledge regarding the scheduling and technical aspects of the publication process itself; my second was how to assess the varied and individualized assignments of each staff member and to assign fair grades.

After publishing three issues relying on the leadership and knowledge of experienced student staff members, I was dissatisfied with my methods of assessing staff members' work. A one-size-fits-all approach to grading would not work and would not be fair given the wide range of experience, ages, and ability levels of the students involved with the monthly production of *The Sound*, our school newspaper. Another problem was the three-week time span reporters had in which to complete their stories and submit them to their particular section editors. Three weeks without any checkpoints or accountability proved excessive, and stories were either not completed in time or had not gone through sufficient submission and revision. The days

immediately prior to the electronic delivery of the final page files to the print shop felt rushed. Graphics and photographs had been completed at the last minute and insufficient time for careful, critical revision of stories led to typos and errors in the final printed newspaper. I felt I needed to change my assessment of the class to increase the quality of the paper and to clarify for students exactly what was expected of them as they struggled to fulfill their unique roles as staff members.

Keeping Journalism Assessments Fair and Unambiguous

It is hard to overestimate the importance not only of informing students of class expectations, but also of soliciting input when establishing them. Students should recognize *prior* to summative assessment what they are expected to know, and produce, to earn a particular grade: “When students know how they will be assessed, and especially when they have been involved in assessment decisions, the likelihood of student success is increased greatly” (O’Connor, 2002, p.177). I felt that knowledge was lacking in the way I was originally grading the newspaper class. The method I was using felt arbitrary and depended on the state of a particular issue’s distance from completion; if we were behind schedule, I would weight the final stories much higher than if we were more certain of reaching the deadline for that issue’s publication. This was not as fair as I felt it should be and created a climate of unpredictability and inconsistent grading practices, with the only student input on the assessment process coming from my frustrated editors.

I believed requiring each student to keep, maintain, and submit a portfolio at the end of each monthly publication cycle might meet these needs. In these portfolios, students would keep an ongoing collection of their work, regardless of whether it was actually published in the newspaper or not, and would have a chance to reflect upon their growth as staff members and on the performance of the staff as a whole. Staff members would also record all time spent working on the paper outside of the journalism class period, for example, time spent at layout nights or photographing a sports event. Additionally, students were required to list all stories they were assigned and to have their respective editors record on an assignment log whether or not each draft of a story or mock page layout was completed by the deadline (see Appendix A).

Finally, the class period immediately following the distribution of an issue was a time for students to assess themselves and to reflect on their contributions to the finished issue in the *Reflection* section of their portfolios (see Appendix B). They were also required to have their editors evaluate them based upon their own observations and then to submit the portfolios to me for a final, official grade. I took into account both students’ self-assessments and their editors’ assessments when assigning a final grade. If there was a significant discrepancy between their assessments, or between their assessments and mine, I would hold a conference to clarify any confusion that might exist regarding expectations.

Maintaining a portfolio was not an optional method of submitting work. If a student wanted to receive credit for an assignment or a submission, it was his or her responsibility to make sure it was received and recorded by his or her editor. While the

requirement to keep a portfolio applied to every staff member, not every student had previously exhibited a work ethic suggesting that a portfolio-based assessment system would be necessary. In my journalism class, some students truly appreciated the opportunity to write and publish for such a broad audience. Conversely, there were some who displayed no such intrinsic motivation to produce a newspaper. This latter group seemed most to need an alternative grading system. While not hostile to the production process, they needed some way to clarify and fulfill what was expected of them if they were to succeed and contribute positively to the production of the newspaper.

Part of my motivation for choosing a portfolio assessment method was purely pragmatic: I wanted one binder per student to hold all handouts, reference sheets, and work instead of dealing with a flurry of loose papers. My primary goal, however, was to incorporate the unique perspective on learning that a portfolio offers students. By including evaluative feedback from three different sources (mine, the editors, and their own) when assigning a grade and requiring that students reflect separately on their own and the staff's performance, I hoped they would all acquire a more critical perspective on their own learning. I hoped that this, in turn, would encourage them to take initiative and assume leadership to identify areas of weakness to improve the newspaper.

Literature Review

The Hazards of Newspaper Sponsorship

Journalism teachers regularly find themselves in a confusing position: They are often unclear about their job duties due to a lack of curricular support and training. As a result, they frequently feel unprepared to teach a journalism class. Many faculty advisers of student publications have little to no qualifications for the job, according to a national study which found that only "37 percent of advisers had been hired [specifically] for their jobs" (Lain, 1992, p. 12). The study also found very few newspaper advisers had any sort journalism experience and that "more than 60 percent . . . had never worked for a newspaper of any sort during college or later years" (p. 13). The presence of untrained advisers and journalism teachers combined with a dearth of curriculum guidelines does not suggest a positive environment in which students may learn the basics of journalistic techniques.

Unlike other students receiving inferior instruction, a poorly trained newspaper staff can run afoul of libel and obscenity laws and potentially face lawsuits. Student publications, like their professional counterparts, use the Associated Press guidelines for style and accuracy. The 2004 guidelines emphasize that "one, there is no substitute for accuracy, and, two, news organizations [including student newspapers] may face legal challenges to what they publish" (p. 338). When student journalists make a mistake, it is published for thousands of readers (many more if available online), so proper training in ethics and accuracy is absolutely essential.

As a first-year newspaper adviser and journalism teacher, I had had very little experience with the writing and layout styles unique to newspaper publication. Making sure that I was accountable for the grading of the class and protecting my professional reputation as a teacher was a top priority. Many advisers find, upon assuming the position, that they have competing professional loyalties: “[an adviser] has responsibility both to his employer, in the form of a school board, and to his profession [as a journalist]” (Driscoll, 1976, p. 8). Journalism is protected by the First Amendment of the Constitution; as such, advisers have the responsibility to promote its practice. Unfortunately, some administrators and school boards see school publications as public relations efforts and not as true journalistic outlets. In case my loyalties ever competed with each other, I felt I had to make sure my professionalism was never called into question. A significant part of a teacher’s reputation, I feel, can be upheld through basing teaching and assessment on sound research and always maintaining accountability to superiors. Using a grading system in my journalism class that was unorganized and open to charges of undue subjectivity, I felt, was a significant threat to my professional reputation. By basing the assessment system on broad principles with specific application to journalism classes, I believed I could find a way to maintain journalistic integrity while fulfilling my professional duties the best way I could.

Challenges in Linking Journalism Instruction to State Learning Standards

Journalism teachers in most areas of the United States do not have access to a defined list of the skills student journalists are expected to learn and demonstrate as do teachers of more conventional subjects like language arts and mathematics. In fact, only two states, Indiana and Mississippi, have separate, stand-alone sets of learning standards for journalism classes taught in public schools (Appel, 2007). The rest of the country either lacks journalism learning standards completely or includes them as a subsection of language arts standards. Learning targets and standards increasingly play a larger national role in core academic subjects like math, reading, writing, and science.

Journalism classes have long been seen as more marginal and less serious than classes found in other disciplines. As far back as 1974, a groundbreaking study presented in the book *Captive Voices* (Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Commission of Inquiry into High School Journalism) found that

the nation’s high schools accord journalism and journalism education low priority. This is reflected in the elective nature of the courses and assignment of teachers and advisers without special skills in the subject area. (n.p.)

Journalism, due to its elective class status, generally does not receive the same level of attention in defining its foundational academic skills that students in other classes must learn.

In Washington State, the most current *K-12 Journalism Curriculum Guidelines* at the time of this study had been published in 1990 and were no longer available from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. Some sections of the booklet were even

older than its publication date. The Washington Journalism Education Association (WJEA), in seeking to circulate these once-official learning targets to new advisers financed the publication entirely from its own budget. Fern Valentine (personal communication, October 13, 2007), one of the writers of the original *Curriculum Guidelines*, as the current WJEA Freedom of Expression Task Force Committee Chair explained the situation, saying she had received

oral permission from the OSPI [Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction] to reprint them exactly as they had been written with the stipulation that WJEA could not charge for them. I have kept them in my basement and distributed them as needed throughout the state. They did not want to reprint them because the format from *Goals and Learner Outcomes* was outdated, although helpful to advisers. . . . Essentially, they said the format is outdated but, if WJEA wants to continue to use them and distribute them at no cost to teachers, we had their permission.

So instead of continuously updated learning targets on which to base lessons, as teachers of the language arts and math have, journalism teachers in Washington state had curriculum guidelines nearly 20 years old and distributed through grassroots channels. Put simply, if a journalism teacher in Washington state wanted to link student performance and achievement to research-based learning standards, as other teachers are expected to do, they would need to take initiative and actively seek out these standards themselves.

A high school newspaper staff is modeled on much larger, real-world newspapers and any change that increases the staff's professionalism is to be welcomed:

Sharing of assessment authority has highly beneficial effects. . . . Students behave and come to perceive themselves as professionals (or professional-like), thinking about what counts as quality and developing personal standards of quality. Students develop adult-like and professional-like skills and dispositions. (Mabry, 1999, p. 71)

Daniel P. and Lauren B. Resnick (1993) also find, after studying teachers' attitudes towards portfolios, that "students should evaluate and annotate their own portfolios at regular intervals and at the end of a unit or school year. Student evaluations should become a part of the portfolio" (p. 8). If portfolios are to serve a genuine educational need and not simply make the teacher's job easier, students must be conscious during the act of compiling them and reflecting on what their collections of work reveal about their attitudes, work ethics and growth as learners.

Distinctive Characteristics of Good Journalism Classes

One dedicated adviser's philosophy, described in the *Captive Voices* (1974) study and shared by many advisers, is that the defining feature of any good high school journalism program is the high degree of decision-making power and influence students have over their own newspaper: "While good journalism education requires teaching

students ethics and responsibilities . . . permitting them to make the ultimate decision on the contents of the newspaper also is essential” (p. 82). Goal 9 of Washington State’s *K-12 Journalism Curriculum Guidelines* (1990) stipulates that “the student plans, designs, and produces a publication.” The *Learner Outcome* specifies that “the student works with the staff to determine content, form, design, budget and circulation” (p.52). The more work the adviser does, the fewer opportunities student staff members have to learn. Students make major decisions affecting content and organize the power structure of the staff on their own.

Minimizing the time spent on non-production activities, such as organizing materials, turning in work for editing and distributing paperwork, means more time available for productive work and minimizes the amount of time spent working on the paper outside of the regular class period during layout nights. Leinhardt and Greeno (1986) write about the beneficial role of habitual practices in complex processes such as those found in newspaper production:

Routines play an important role in skilled performances because they allow relatively low-level activities to be carried out efficiently, without diverting significant mental resources from the more general and substantive activities. (as cited in Irby, 1992, p. 7)

Applying this idea to journalism education means increased organization could free up more time to produce the paper and to keep layout nights from becoming long and tedious.

Assessment Challenges Unique to Journalism Classes

While there is a scarcity of literature focusing directly on assessing high school journalism programs, problems and situations similar to my own regarding the complexity of assigning fair grades to students with varying assignments and skill levels have been studied and reported, revealing that opportunities for self-assessment can facilitate student learning and accountability in grading.

Assessing Different Abilities, Experience, and Work Styles

A veteran student publications adviser describes a common hypothetical situation derived from her experiences:

Megan is a photographer who spends every weekend covering all the school’s sporting events, but she often appears to be doing “very little” during class And Kara grasps the potential impact of a discussion at the school board meeting and can search out sources to get facts she needs, but deadlines? She doesn’t know the meaning of the word. (Bowen, 2004, par. 1-3)

The class period in which the newspaper class is held presents a unique challenge for fair assessment; for some students, class time is the perfect opportunity to work on graphics and computer tasks, for others, it means their interview subjects and off-

campus leads are unavailable to them and they have little to do. Another veteran adviser identifies the dilemma:

How do we address those students who are upset because Ted (who goofs off frequently in class but is organized, looks for additional work to complete and always stays after school) gets a better grade than Marcia (who gets her work done in class but loses other people's stories, doesn't return phone calls and constantly complains about everything and everyone? (Nagy, 2004, par. 8)

It is important to have a grading system with enough adaptability to accommodate every student in the class and to fairly assess their contributions to the publication while "keep[ing] individual differences in mind. It's hard to put the square pegs in round holes – much less make writers, photographers, designers and ad salespersons accomplish exactly the same goals" (Bowen, 2004, par. 8). Most of the literature dealing with these unique assessment challenges describes the importance of emphasizing one particular grading criterion more often than any other: meeting deadlines. Yet another adviser describes how she addressed this criterion: "The penalty for missing deadline is appropriately stiff. The system is intended to encourage students to (1) choose manageable assignments, (2) do their best work the first time and (3) meet deadlines" (Hatfield, 2004, par. 11). For many advisers, including me, meeting deadlines is of paramount importance: "Weight the grading so what's important to you means a great deal in the final results. That means if you believe making deadlines is paramount for journalists, make sure those who miss them suffer appropriately" (Bowen, 2004, par. 8). Making deadlines the primary basis for a grade is recommended by one adviser who states this quite succinctly:

When setting up any system, first start with deadlines. Be clear what is due and when It is an all or nothing on the first deadline. . . . Holding them to the fire on deadlines with an all-or-nothing grade (five for on time, zero for five minutes late) will gain the staff's respect and grades will be in the book. Deadlines are real world. . . . Using deadlines as the foundation, the rest of the system will fall into place. (Nagy, 2004, par. 11-19)

Using professional journalistic publications as a model emphasizes the importance of deadlines, which commercial newspapers strictly enforce.

Incorporating Beneficial Self-Assessment and Reflection

While self-assessment and reflection are important components of portfolios in any type of class, when used to assess work for a publication class, the act takes on paramount importance: "Students who critique their own work cannot escape responsibility for the grade they receive" (Hatfield, 2004, par. 1). Several seasoned advisers who describe their grading systems in detail recommend some type of reflective activity as meaningful for the students and a source of valuable information for advisers. After publishing each issue, one adviser requires a

reflective letter and critique of the edition. This is their opportunity to tell me what happened during production that I might not have noticed. . . . They may talk about their frustration of not finding any advertisers or talk about a problem with a staff member that I can address at another time. (Nagy, 2004, par. 17)

This author showed that, when teaching a diverse class of students, giving them not only unique assignments but also multiple methods of communication ensures that students who may not feel comfortable venting to their peers or to their editors nevertheless have an outlet for concerns.

Not only can self-assessment and reflection aid in communication between staff and adviser, one adviser believes it can actually help students become more aware of their own learning and encourage them to grow:

Students do better work when they are largely responsible for assessing the quality of their work. The positive benefits are enormous. . . . Most important, the students who work harder in all areas of producing a newspaper simply learn more. They also, some for the first time, learn that grades reflect and enhance learning. (Hatfield, 2004, par. 18)

This suggests that allowing students some degree of control gives them a degree of empowerment and responsibility that can have beneficial results. Instead of the adviser doing all of the work when it comes to assessment, allowing students to participate in the process gives them a sense of the direct relationship between their efforts and a grade that they would not experience otherwise. They can internalize the direct results of their hard work and, if they know beforehand that they will have to make the case for their grades, then their performance can rise accordingly.

Maintaining Professional Standards of Accountability

While students ideally should manage the production of their own paper, the teacher's professional standards demand that they reserve the final power of assigning an official grade to any work, requiring "teachers [to] provide opportunities for students to discuss how assessments will be chosen, scored and combined, but . . . the final decision about each issue rests with the teachers" and "teachers [should] apply their professional judgment and balance student suggestions with policy regulations" (O'Connor, 2002, p.180). When applied to journalism classes, this means that advisers need to maintain accountability to their superiors in case their grading practices are called into question and they are required to defend them.

To promote journalism classes as rigorous and academically legitimate and to substantiate many journalism educators' belief that teaching critical inquiry and practicing the first amendment are vital for the health of our country's democracy, the responsibility that advisers have to be fair, accurate, and professional assessors of student work should be no different from teachers of more traditional classes: "Where a free, vigorous student press does exist, there is a healthy ferment of ideas and opinions" (Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Commission of Inquiry into High School

Journalism, 1974, p. 49). Several experienced advisers write about the necessity of maintaining an assessment system that can withstand the critical external scrutiny of administrators or parents who may not understand the nature of journalism classes:

Explain your system up front. Be sure students – and even their parents – understand how it works and what they need to achieve to earn a certain grade – or to avoid a bad grade. Supplying rubrics . . . can be helpful. (Bowen, 2004, par. 8)

This adviser's grading philosophy emphasizes that assessments should be predictable and clear and implies that subjective grading and making exceptions to standards like meeting deadline should be avoided to maintain professionalism and rigor.

One adviser who emphasizes self-assessment in her grading system because it offers important opportunities to establish adviser accountability writes that

teachers usually have a good idea of what grades our journalism students deserve. This system merely provides documentation to support the grades . . . and assures that the students, too, understand the validity of the grade. . . . Parents, whether they are pleased or displeased with the grade, have to admit that it is valid because they can access the documentation prepared by the students themselves. (Hatfield, 2004, par. 19-20)

Self-assessment, therefore, offers a great opportunity because the primary justification for a grade comes, not from the teacher, but directly from the student. That same adviser also claims that she is almost always in agreement with a student's self-evaluation and has never had to override any student's judgment. In fact, most students who have not been in agreement with her have been excessively critical of themselves. Therefore, if parents have a problem with their children's grades, then they are more likely to be in disagreement with the child rather than questioning the soundness of the adviser's assessment practices or the professional integrity of the adviser.

Based on what I learned from the literature, I was eager to see whether a portfolio assessment system would help students develop responsibility as they documented and proved their efforts toward a grade, as well as make my grading of their work as fair, professional, and transparent as I felt it was in my other classes.

Methods

This study involved a blend of qualitative and quantitative data carefully chosen to provide multiple perspectives on the newspaper's quality and any changes readers may have detected over time. The notion and definition of quality is subjective and many factors could influence readers' opinions of *The Sound's* success (or lack thereof) in covering student and community life in a timely, effective manner. To reflect this, I tried to gain feedback from multiple sources, including questionnaires and interviews with students and faculty members to compare and contrast with my own observations and impressions as an adviser.

Data Collection

Surveys

Two self-administered questionnaires were distributed to two groups of students at the school. The first survey involved the students in my journalism class (see Appendix C). Respondents were asked to comment on changes in the timeliness of the staff's production of work and any other changes in the class after the introduction of the portfolios. Several questions were open-ended and asked staff members to give their opinions as to how useful the portfolios were to them and to the class at large. The survey for my journalism class resulted in 18 completed questionnaires.

I distributed the second questionnaire to non-newspaper students in two classes juniors and two classes seniors (see Appendix D). This survey asked questions about the timeliness of stories and the presence of distracting typos and errors. I chose older students because they tend to read the paper more often and have had more exposure to the school paper across time than younger students. The surveys completed by my junior and senior classes resulted in 80 completed questionnaires. All students to whom the questionnaires were distributed chose to complete them.

Interviews

In addition to surveys, I developed a protocol of questions and interviewed my student editors to obtain their impressions on the success of the portfolio grading system and to solicit recommendations for future changes (see Appendix E). Interviews were conducted during work times in class and followed a basic protocol of questions I felt the editors were well-qualified to answer. These individual interviews were brief and mostly consisted of their opinions on how the portfolios changed the class and their respective jobs.

I also interviewed the principal of my school for his impressions of any changes in the newspaper's quality over the past year. This was a formal interview that lasted about 15 minutes and was scheduled several weeks in advance by appointment. Additionally, I interviewed the yearbook adviser who was also my department chairperson for his thoughts on the recent changes in the newspaper. I selected him for an interview because his class is structured very similarly to the newspaper class and because he is familiar with the unique challenges of advising student-run publication staffs. I also produced an interview protocol for faculty subjects prior to meeting with them (see Appendix F).

Observation

As a journalism teacher who extends his role outside of the normal school day into the after-school club hours, my role in this study was both active participant and privileged, active observer. I was able, during production times like layout night, to step back and observe any prominent changes or trends that resulted from the switch to portfolio grading. These observations were conducted during the two or three class periods, depending on the week's alternating class schedule, leading up to and

including layout night. On the last layout night I observed, I focused on one student in particular, John, and his marked change in engagement in the class.

Data Analysis

Surveys

The questionnaires I created for this study contained several types of questions. One type used extensively was a Likert scale. To analyze the data from the questionnaires, I counted how many students responded to each option on the attitude scale and converted that into a percentage of the total number of students responding to that particular question. For clarity in presentation, I formatted the results into pie graphs. Since many questions asked respondents to comment on changes from before and after the use of portfolios, these pie graphs provided a clear portrait of the students' changing perceptions. To analyze the open-ended questions, I compiled the responses into three different categories of responses: positive, indifferent, and negative.

Interviews

I took notes during interviews and typed up the responses into transcripts immediately following their conclusion. Again, I compiled the responses into several different categories showing positive, negative, and indifferent perceptions.

Observations

While it was impossible to record everything that occurred during a particular layout night, every time I noticed students behaving differently after the portfolios had been implemented than they had earlier in the year or were engaged in the processes that the portfolios required, I did stop and record what I was witnessing. I recorded both students' negative reactions and positive reactions.

Ethics

Protecting students' anonymity was of primary importance during all phases of this study. Because the majority of students in the newspaper class were minors, I sent home a permission form for their parents or legal guardians to sign (see Appendix G), carefully explaining the risks and benefits that their children might be exposed to as a result of participating in the study. I also distributed a form for the students themselves to sign (see Appendix H). Both forms emphasized the mandatory requirement for all students to keep a portfolio, although participation in the study itself through surveys, interviews, and my observations was entirely optional. Students could decline to participate at any stage of the study, even if they initially gave their assent. I received signed copies of every parental consent and student assent form I distributed. Every student in the class and their guardians gave full permission for participation.

To ensure that students filling out the self-administered surveys both in my newspaper class and in my other classes felt comfortable enough to answer questions honestly without fear of retribution, I read aloud an assent script prior to distributing the

surveys which, once again, stressed that the surveys were both anonymous and optional (see Appendix I). Students could decline to participate entirely, do only part of the survey, or stop at any point if they felt uncomfortable.

The interviews I conducted did not allow the respondents to give their opinions anonymously. Once again, prior to the interview, I reminded them that their real names would not be used and that their answers would be kept in a secure location. In reporting, I replaced their real names with pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. No data or distinctive detail appears in the study that might reveal their real identity. I also kept the identity of the colleagues I interviewed for this study confidential, identifying them only by their professional title or job duty.

Data Presentation

The most significant source of data, I found, was collected in the surveys from both newspaper students and readers. Once the survey data was compiled into categories and displayed on pie graphs, I looked for data from the interviews and observations that both supported and challenged what the questionnaires suggested. All three data sources indicated students and faculty members noticed several changes which emerged as themes: changes in news timeliness, changes in professionalism and interest level of stories, and changes in newspaper staff members' perceptions of the portfolio's utility to the production process.

Changes in the Timeliness of News Stories

Questions from both sets of surveys sought to measure the currency of the stories covered in the newspaper. Shortening the time required for production was central to my motivation in trying the portfolio system. The data collected into graphs (see Figures 1 and 2) show the changes in timeliness from before and after using the portfolio system, as perceived by both the newspaper staff and the general student readership.

The percentage of students describing the *Sound's* news stories as *mostly current* and *always current* increased dramatically after the implementation of portfolios, while the reported percentage of *mixed* and *old* stories decreased. The responses of newspaper students to questions about meeting deadlines also reflect this change (see Figures 3 and 4). While most newspaper students did not describe an increase in on-time submission of their own stories, more than three quarters of the respondents saw an increase of their entire staff's on-time submission of stories and other work.

Figure 1. Response to non-newspaper student survey question about story timeliness prior to portfolios

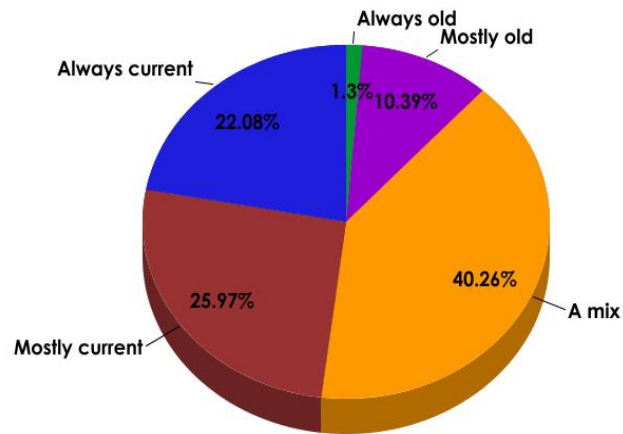


Figure 2. Response to non-newspaper student survey question about story timeliness after using portfolios

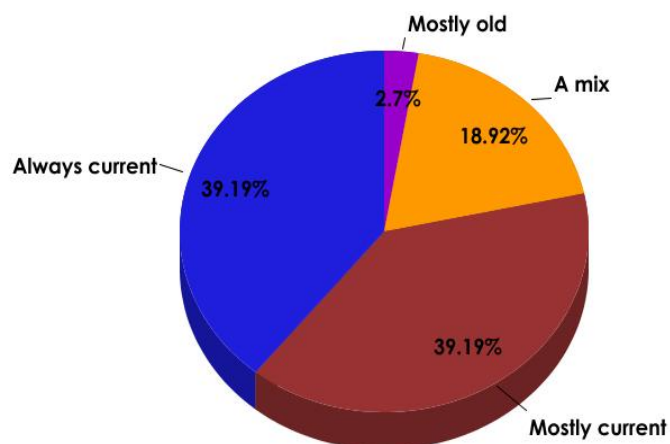


Figure 3. Newspaper student survey responses to question about changes in individual submission of stories prior to deadline

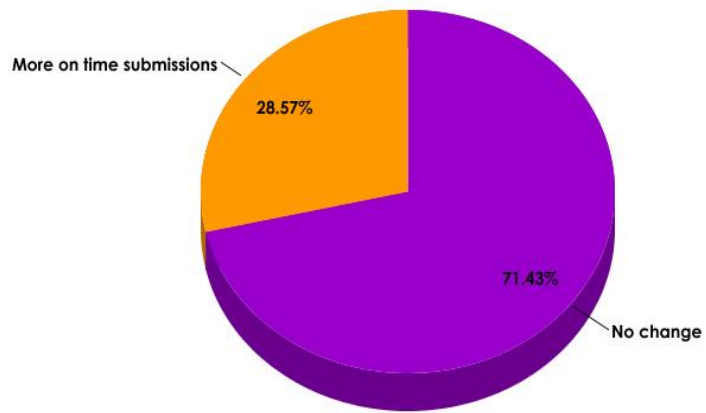
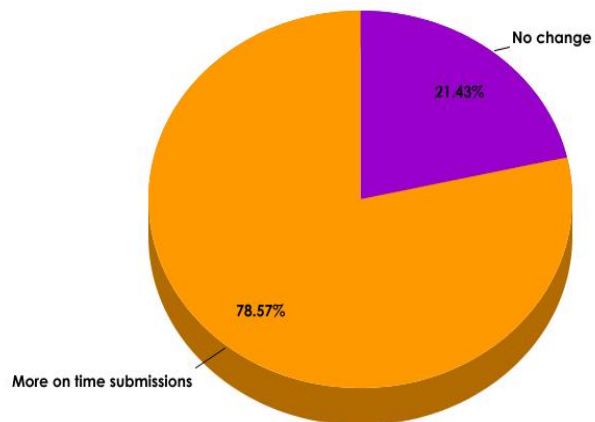


Figure 4. Newspaper student survey responses to question about changes in entire staff's submission of stories prior to deadline



In the open-ended section of the survey for non-newspaper students, many of the comments also described the increased newsworthiness of the articles:

"The stories are more up to date and interesting."

"More news articles every time."

"Getting the paper out on time has been a huge change from past years."

"The newspaper staff has been getting out the papers faster so the stories aren't like a week old already! Good job!"

"I feel as though the newspaper is more current and has interesting articles for all students."

The newspaper student survey included a question prompting the respondents to comment on whether or not students in the class benefited from portfolios and how they may have helped or hindered the production process. Some responses directly mentioned changes in the ability of the staff to meet deadlines:

"This portfolio system keeps people on track [and] helps meet deadlines."

"It promotes productivity in the class."

"[Producing each issue is] more fun and easier to do because of the deadlines."

"I think that as a whole the class has benefited from using the portfolio system by being pressured to meet deadlines."

Most newspaper students found that using the portfolios helped reporters and artists keep track of their work and make sure that it was being submitted on time for a maximum number of points for their grades.

The predominance of survey data indicated that both newspaper students and the student readership at the school found that news stories were more up-to-date and relevant after using the portfolio system. Newspaper students reported feeling more pressure to meet deadlines, and the class overwhelmingly indicated that their collective ability to meet deadlines improved after using the portfolios. Readers of the *Sound* reported that, during the period that portfolios were in use, the news stories that appeared were much more current and the presence of old news diminished substantially. I noticed an increase in the number of stories that were in the final, revised form prior to layout night. Students appeared to internalize the story submission process and were able to write more news stories on time for the issues produced while using the portfolio, enabling the staff to produce several editions longer in length than before.

Due to our monthly publication cycle, covering news was a delicate matter. If news stories were written too early in the month then, by the time the paper was

distributed, many stories would be long forgotten or stale. To avoid this, my editors did not assign them until the days immediately prior to the layout session. If a reporter failed to finish a story on time, then the successful completion and distribution of the newspaper was jeopardized. Prior to implementing the portfolio, this happened with *The Sound's* January issue. During the layout night for that issue, several students were typing their first draft stories. At that point, all stories should have already gone through multiple revisions and been finished. As the night went on, one student, to avoid the editors noticing that she had not completed her story on time, submitted her first unedited draft directly to the electronic *Final Draft Stories* folder from which layout students retrieved stories to appear on their pages. As the night's deadline approached, students began noticing that several of her stories, as well as some from other students, did not meet length requirements and contained journalistic style errors as well as common misspellings and typos. Failing to submit work on time led to first drafts appearing on final pages. The staff determined that there was too much work left to complete successfully that night, requiring an additional work session over the weekend, and this delayed the distribution of the paper by two days.

After implementing the portfolio system, I did not observe any detectable increase in the amount of time required to lay out the paper. While it is inevitable that breaking news is written during layout night, more stories were completed beforehand. One capable reporter and editor-in-training, Heather, when interviewed about the portfolio, stated that turning in drafts on time "became much more time-relevant because we realized that it was important to have an up-to-date news story" (personal communication, August 23, 2007). In fact, the two issues published using the portfolio system increased the length of the paper from 12 to 16 pages without a noticeable increase in the length of time it took to prepare each issue for publication. The final issue of the year contained three pages of strictly news stories, the largest number in any issue that year.

Assertion 1: Portfolios helped students meet, and student editors enforce, individual deadlines, which led to more predictability in scheduling layout and distribution dates and ensured that news stories were current.

Changes in Content

While the non-newspaper students' comments regarding changes in the paper's content were generally positive in nature, the degree of improvement directly traceable to the portfolios was more difficult to gauge. My introduction of the portfolio coincided with a series of events at our school that made national news on two unrelated occasions: one was the cancellation of a school dance due to inappropriate student behavior, and the other was questionable use of surveillance camera footage by a school employee that led to a student protest and high-profile media coverage. Both events were covered nationally on the Associated Press news wire service. Our newspaper staff covered both events in depth, and I believe interest in the school newspaper naturally increased due to the events. In a certain sense, my staff was blessed with several dramatic episodes that lent themselves to gripping coverage. No events of comparable magnitude occurred prior to the introduction of the portfolios. The

responses to the questions regarding the interest level of the paper show significant changes (see Figures 5 and 6). The percentage of students describing the newspaper as *always interesting* and *usually interesting* increased dramatically after the switch to portfolios yet, as previously mentioned, this may be attributable to the events that happened at our school.

However, some readers of the student newspaper did notice changes in the content of the paper not necessarily attributable to atypical occurrences at the school. Not every element of the newspaper considered content is a current event or news story. Much of the content of a newspaper is found in its graphical elements, such as photographs, illustrations, cartoons, and other items requiring creative graphic design. The non-newspaper student survey question regarding changes in the quality of the graphic elements of the newspaper also showed a change (see Figures 7 and 8).

Respondents reported that the graphics of the newspaper were *very interesting* more than twice as often as before, and the percentage reporting *not interesting* graphics was almost half of what it was prior to portfolios. Students also commented directly upon the quality, readability, and relevance of the stories found in the newspaper:

“It seems more put together and organized . . . good things to read about.”

“More variety of articles.”

“Topics geared toward students and community news.”

“The graphics are better, more appealing.”

“Topics that actually appeal to students, more fun to read. You can tell more time was spent on it.”

“It has interesting layout style, articles, and pictures.”

The high school principal noticed some changes in the content and tone of the paper. One particular improvement, he noted, was seen in many articles recently that “were a lot more like real journalism [and] more professional” (personal communication, June 8, 2007). This contrasts with coverage in the recent past which had too often “seemed much more like a blog.” The department chair, also the adviser of the yearbook, also noticed changes in recent issues of the newspaper:

I saw the quality improve, but the content improved more than the quality. . . . The news stories are much more applicable to the students and community . . . If someone who didn’t have a kid at the school picked up an issue of the paper and read it, they’d get a very good idea of what goes on here at the school and what the climate is like. (personal communication, June 5, 2007)

Figure 5. Response to non-newspaper student survey question about the interest level of the paper prior to portfolios

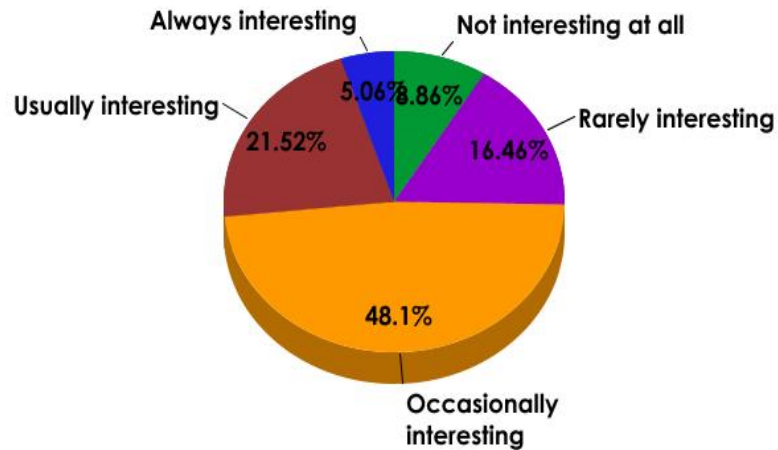


Figure 6. Response to non-newspaper student survey question about the interest level of the paper after the switch to portfolios

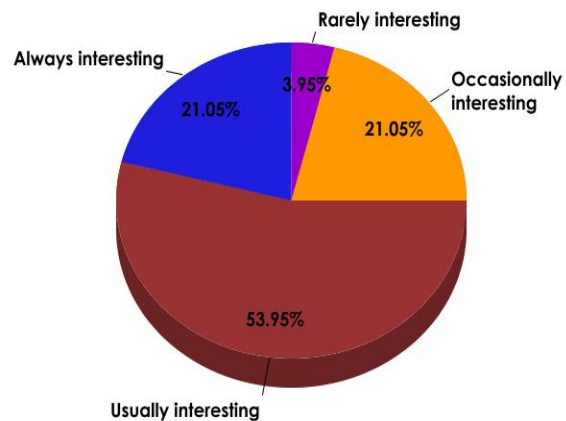


Figure 7. Response to non-newspaper student survey question about graphics quality prior to portfolios

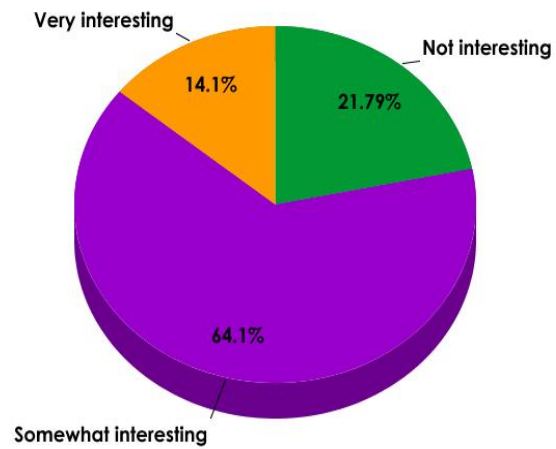
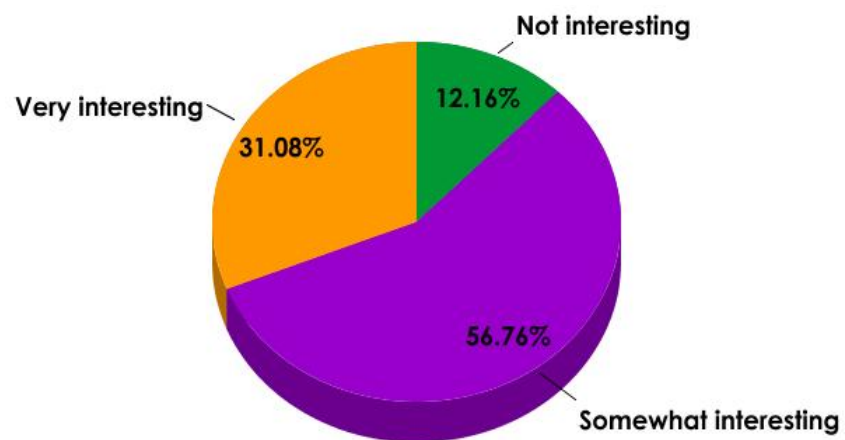


Figure 8. Response to non-newspaper student survey question about graphics quality after using portfolios



In my journalism program, the class period immediately following the distribution of the newspaper was usually devoted to brainstorming and discussing story ideas for the next issue. Before portfolios were introduced, students were expected to come up with story ideas on the spot, and a master list was created on a whiteboard specifically devoted to recording each section's stories and the reporters writing them. These class periods began to frustrate me and the student editors. Often, the students would run out of ideas, and the brainstorming would grind to a halt. To counter this, I began assigning story ideas as homework: five ideas per section of the newspaper. This was a mandatory assignment to be recorded in each staff member's assignment log portfolio section. This assignment started the issue publication cycle twice, and I observed a greater degree of student participation and discussion. In fact, both times the class became rowdy with several students volunteering to write stories based on others' ideas. For the first time all year, the class had more ideas than space. Additionally, I noticed a change in the complexity of their discussions. Instead of simply trying to come up with any idea, the editors were now guiding the class to find the most effective angle that the reporter should take. This was rarely, if ever, discussed prior to the assigning of story ideas as part of the assignment log.

Not only did the readers surveyed comment upon the increase in graphics quality, they observed an overall improvement in the interest level of stories themselves. The positive comments from surveys about the appeal of articles not inspired by dramatic incidents at the school noted an increased variety of stories and a greater level of organization throughout each issue. Reader surveys showed that the quality of the graphics, like photos, illustrations, and visual design also increased substantially. My interview with my department head and yearbook adviser also revealed a more thorough coverage of student life both within school and beyond, from his observations. My principal noticed a more professional tone in the paper after portfolios were implemented and praised my staff's handling of sensitive issues.

After requiring story ideas as homework, I noticed the class sessions in which story ideas were finalized and assigned were much livelier because students had spent more time outside of class thinking about what would make interesting stories. Because stories were completed in a more timely fashion than before using portfolios, layout editors knew how much space they had for graphics and photos. Students had more time in advance to take photos that, previously, might not have seemed needed until layout night – too late, resulting in publication of a hastily drawn illustration instead. Knowing earlier in the production process what the stories would be, spending more time and energy discussing them, and getting them completed faster, led to more flexibility and time for creating better graphics and taking better photographs, which the readers noticed.

Assertion 2: Portfolios improved the quality and interest level of Feature and Opinion stories, along with photographs and other graphics, by providing staff members more time in advance to plan, develop, and improve their ideas.

Changes in Typographical Errors and Other Mistakes

Non-newspaper students found a detectable change in the number of typographical errors and other distracting mistakes that appeared in the newspaper (see Figures 9 and 10). There was also a very clear, although not dramatic, decrease in the perceived number of distracting errors and mistakes that slipped past the editors' eyes and wound up in the printed version. Students on the newspaper staff also found that fewer errors were being published. Although it was an option on the selected response survey question, no students reported finding a greater number of mistakes after the change (see Figure 11).

The mandatory story submission process ensured that stories were submitted at least once to a trained editor and underwent multiple revisions, instead of submitted directly to the page layout staff member for placement on the page. Both surveys suggest that this process was successful in reducing the number of errors that made it to the printing stage.

I witnessed how, when the newspaper staff was unorganized or did not sufficiently plan out the content of each issue at the start of the production cycle, they often produced stories and graphics at the last minute; they procrastinated. My very first layout night ran behind schedule. A student had been assigned a feature story about good surfing spots in Washington state. This student had not been to school at all that week, so his story was not submitted before layout night, but the layout editor had left space on the page for it. On layout night, the reporter finally made a brief appearance and typed his story, without an editor's help, directly onto the page – using our graphic design program – and promptly left again before anyone had a chance to edit his story. Because he had not submitted his story properly, it appeared in the printed newspaper without ever having been checked by an editor for accuracy and style. Luckily, this article did not contain any serious errors or inaccuracies.

This occurrence was problematic for several reasons: While our graphic design program allowed for the addition of text directly onto the page, it did not contain a feature to check spelling as a word processor does. Ideally, the only new text that should have been added to a page was a headline, while page editors should simply have needed to copy and paste a final revised story from a Microsoft Word document directly onto the page. Failing to adhere to this process meant that even the most glaring typos might easily slip through the editors' eyes and into the printed newspaper. While some mistakes in a high school newspaper might seem inevitable, when it happens too often, readers notice and it can be damaging to a program's reputation and credibility.

Assertion 3: Portfolios played a positive role in decreasing typographical errors by encouraging proper story submission, editing, and revision prior to publication.

Figure 9. Response to non-newspaper student survey question about distracting errors and mistakes prior to portfolio system

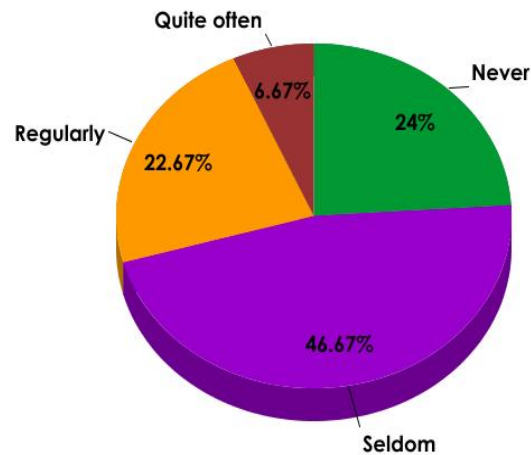


Figure 10. Response to non-newspaper student survey question about distracting errors and mistakes after change to portfolios

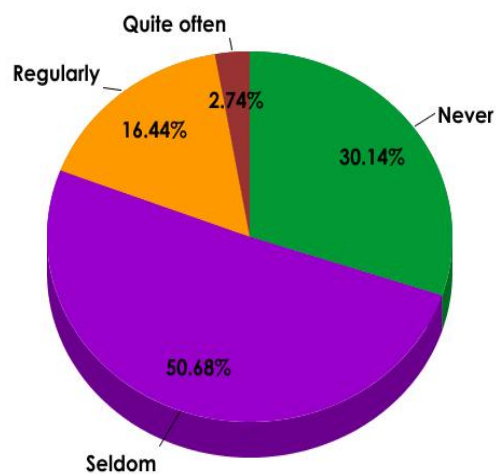
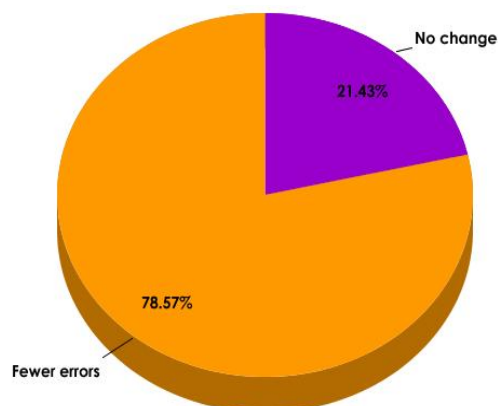


Figure 11. Response to newspaper student survey question about distracting errors and mistakes after change to portfolios



Newspaper Students' Responses to Portfolios

A very important feature determining whether or not the portfolio system was a success was how useful students actually felt it was, not just for their own grade but also for improving the quality of their publication. Keeping a portfolio required additional record-keeping procedures that every student was required to follow, and I sought to determine whether or not they found it worth the extra effort. My announcement of a change to the portfolio grading system had not been greeted warmly and several students openly questioned the value of such a decision. After the announcement, one girl raised her hand and asked, "What's the point?" I was emphatic at all times that the main goal was to increase attention to deadlines, which I hoped would make the newspaper better. Two questions on the newspaper student survey indicated differences of opinion both before and after using the portfolios (see Figures 12 and 13).

Figure 12. Newspaper students' reaction to portfolio system before using it

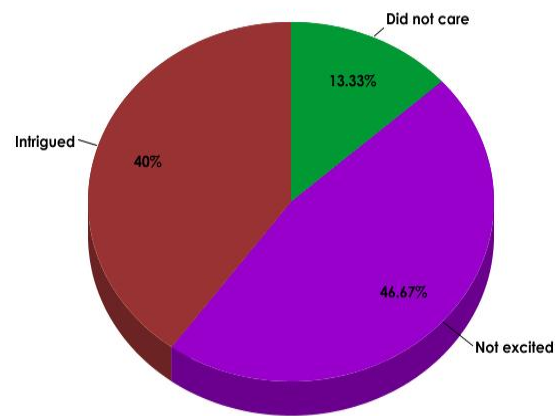
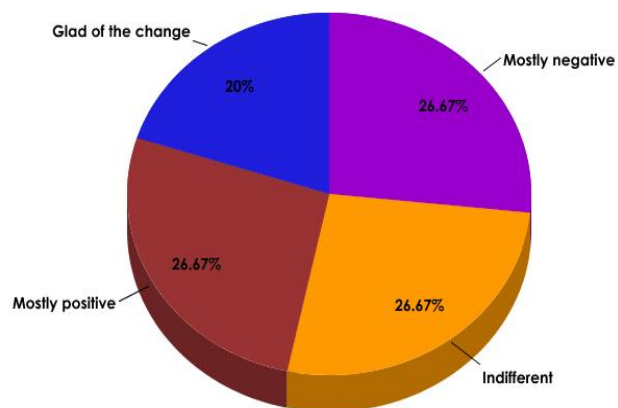


Figure 13. Newspaper students' reaction to portfolio system after using it



From the survey data, it was clear that the numbers of students responding both favorably and unfavorably to the portfolios was roughly the same. The only significant change occurred in the doubling of the number of students who were indifferent to the portfolios and the halving of the number of students who were hostile to the portfolios. To further measure how useful students really felt the portfolios to be, several open-ended questions on the newspaper student survey asked for feedback on what was both useful and detrimental about using the portfolios. Positive comments about the portfolios included:

"The class benefited because it allowed you [the adviser and the editors] to see who was doing their work and who was slacking and needed motivation."

"The portfolios force writers to turn their stories in on time."

"I think the newspaper did benefit from this portfolio assignment. The portfolio gave us a better understanding of how we are graded. After each issue, we are able to open up the portfolio and see what we have done."

"Yes [the portfolios were helpful] because [certain newspaper students] didn't necessarily love their work."

"It did affect the class positively; there were more stories that were documented for being turned in [on time]."

"Overall, I think the class benefited. The people who didn't work as hard [before] worked harder."

Negative views of the portfolios includes:

"It's really, really hard to keep up with."

"It doesn't affect our writing or wanting to write . . . it is a hassle."

"Required signatures forces the editors to spend more time on us rather than work."

"I didn't find it very helpful because I'm [only] in layout."

"People still didn't get their work done on time always, and it only [changed] the grades."

I conducted interviews with the editor-in-chief, David, and the two younger editors, Katie and Allison, who were training to be the next year's leaders, asking about their perceptions of the portfolios' utility. Of her reaction upon hearing about the portfolios for the first time, Katie said, "I was skeptical, but once we got them passed out . . . it became more of a system of production instead of scattered material like it was before" (personal communication, August 24, 2007). Allison said, "My initial thoughts were that it would be more work but worth it because we'd be more organized as a staff" (personal communication, August 24, 2007). David's positive response noted that "the

portfolios [became] a visual reminder. The necessity of getting things checked off was a good motivator and gave us a place to start” (personal communication, August 24, 2007).

One of my concerns had been that preparing the portfolios might compete with valuable time that could be spent working on the newspaper. Were the portfolios worth the investment of time and energy? Did working on the paper compete with production time? “Yes,” Allison said, “sometimes when I knew they were due, because it was hard to remember to get all my stories together and signed off” (personal communication, August 24, 2007). Katie disagreed, saying, “No, never, because it’s not hard to three-hole punch something and get it signed off . . . [but] the kids who didn’t [take it seriously] just wound up wasting more time” (personal communication, August 24, 2007).

I also wanted to know if, taken as whole, the portfolios were a positive change for the class and, if so, whether and how they benefited the newspaper staff. Allison thought they were helpful:

The portfolio made things more clear . . . laid everything out for you – what you did on a particular issue and how on time you were. I think it was a little annoying sometimes having to fill it out, but it put a lot more order into our chaotic class. (personal communication, August 24, 2007)

Katie agreed, saying, “Individually, it helped the publication process because having a system like that made it easier to grade students’ work and figure out who was on task” (personal communication, August 24, 2007). When asked specifically how students benefited from using them, they both mentioned accountability and responsibility. “Portfolios help kids who lack organizational skills and who need help with time management,” said David (personal communication, August 24, 2007). Katie said it “helped the unorganized. There are a lot of unorganized kids in the class this year, and [they] finally had a system for once,” although it only worked for kids “who could take direction” (personal communication, August 24, 2007). Allison agreed:

The unorganized students benefited. It was hectic before, and the editor was supposed to edit and return stuff on their own. With the portfolios, it made unorganized students more able to keep track of their stories and for the editors to edit them as well. (personal communication, August 24, 2007)

One criticism that surfaced regarding the portfolios was potential bias toward students who mainly wrote news, opinion, and feature stories over students involved mostly in layout, art, and photography. This complaint also surfaced in the newspaper students’ survey responses. Next year’s layout editor, in training during portfolio implementation, Nicole, mentioned this specifically: “We never really graded as much on layout as we did on stories” (personal communication, September 18, 2007). She had several suggestions for how the portfolio format could be changed and modified to be more relevant for layout students:

I'd like them to draw their pages by hand first to plan them out. It's hard to think of what you want to do when you're sitting in front of a blank computer screen. . . . I'm working on a layout checklist for layout people and that could go in the Reference section [of the portfolio]. (personal communication, September 18, 2007)

Nicole did, however, see a change in the time that it took to ready stories for placement on the respective page. A layout staff member cannot complete his or her page until after receiving all the stories that to be printed on that page. Nicole said, "There was a bigger motivation to turn stories in on time, so people could start laying out their pages" (personal communication, September 18, 2007). Layout and graphics staff members did appear to benefit from the portfolio, but in a more indirect manner than reporters.

John, the target student. One student in particular exhibited a marked difference in his behavior after the change to the portfolio grading system. John was a newcomer to the class, and from my impressions and those of the editors, did not express or display any intrinsic motivation to publish a high-quality newspaper on a timely schedule. During work times in class and on layout nights, he needed regular monitoring to ensure he wasn't surfing the internet or watching *Youtube* videos with the sound turned off. He generally got his work done, but usually at the last minute with minimal effort and only after extensive nagging by the editors and me. Several delays in the production cycle were traceable back to John's not having his work completed and submitted in a timely manner or at all. He was exactly the type of student I thought might benefit most from the increased organization I hoped the portfolios would offer.

During one layout night early in the year, John was assigned to take a photograph, an exterior shot of the school. He was gone much longer than necessary to take the picture, and the layout people were anxious to get the photograph on their page so they could finish. Another student in the class informed me candidly that he had seen John smoking across the street in the neighboring church's parking lot. When John finally showed up with the picture, I confronted him in private about his misbehavior and discussed, along with the disciplinary measures I would take, his attitude towards the newspaper and how his behavior hurt the reputation of the entire newspaper program. While he was forthcoming and honest about his actions, his comments made it clear that he took responsibility solely for his own behavior and that people shouldn't judge the newspaper based upon him. He insisted whatever he was doing hurt only him, his own reputation, or his own grade. His attitude was purely that of an individual, not part of a collective effort with a common mission. He felt, as long as he eventually did what was asked of him, that was the only basis on which I, or the rest of the class, could judge his contributions.

Despite John's apathetic approach to newspaper production, he would often show an unexpected concern for his own grade when the anxiety of an impending progress report or report card descended upon the school. Of all the students in the class, he was distinguished by his frequent (often irritating and inconvenient) requests to me for informal grade checks. He mentioned frequently that his father was very angry when he received poor grades. The unstructured nature of the class prior to the introduction of the portfolios seemed genuinely to bother John. He would often say, "I

just need to know how I'm doing." He consistently expressed disagreement with his grade by insisting, on multiple occasions, "but I get my work done." This was usually true, my editors and I would point out, but not without plenty of monitoring and heavy-handed encouragement after the deadline had already passed. He even missed several layout nights, and other students had to step in and either finish his stories or write ones he had been assigned but had never started.

After I introduced the portfolios to the class, the editors and I noticed a significant change in his work ethic. While he was still nowhere close to displaying the drive and intrinsic motivation I expected from student editors, such as volunteering story ideas and asking for extra duties, his approach to the class and his individual assignments changed dramatically. He used the portfolio as a way to prove his grades and to justify his efforts. He did not argue with his grades after they were assigned, but instead became meticulous about writing down every assignment and then pestering his editor for a signature proving its completion, almost to the point of irritation. John took the due dates very seriously and, during a class period when a particular story was due, was rarely seen without portfolio in hand. The requests for progress reports and grade checks decreased noticeably, and my student editors commented in meetings that they noticed a dramatic improvement in his contributions to the newspaper. In fact, one of his better stories was deemed good enough by the student editors to appear on the front page of the year's final issue. The portfolio seemed to offer a predictable way to earn a grade and document effort for John.

One day, towards the end of the year, during a regular class period, John lost his portfolio. He became visibly upset and would not go to work. I told him we would work something out, but he said several times something to this effect: "But it had all my signatures in it!" John looked several times in the cupboard where the portfolios were stored and went around to each student at his or her workstation, checking others' portfolios to make sure his hadn't been picked up by accident. Meanwhile, he was making sounds of frustration and muttering what I assumed were profanities under his breath while pacing the classroom. He appeared inconsolable, too upset to work, so I had him assemble a replacement portfolio out of a spare binder and rubrics. We then had his editor sign off on the two deadlines from memory, attesting that John had successfully met them for that month's issue. When this was resolved, John was able to work again on his story.

After publishing the final year's issue, I interviewed John about his experience in the class. His thoughts on the portfolio mirrored the change in behavior we noticed during the previous months. In fact, several of the editors had mentioned him explicitly as exactly the type of student who benefited most from using the portfolio system. About the portfolios, John said, "They were a really good idea . . . It kept me more organized, and I knew what I needed to accomplish at the end of each month" (personal communication, June 14, 2007). Although John's performance improved significantly over the course of publishing the final issues of the year, he opted not to reenroll in the newspaper class the next year because he "just knew [he] wouldn't give it the work it needs" (personal communication, June 14, 2007). During the time he used

the portfolio, however, there was a substantial improvement in his productivity, and he became a more reliable contributor to the students' publication.

Newspaper students' increased responsibilities. After the change to portfolios, staff members became responsible for supplying a burden of proof to me, the adviser, to justify their grades. Their individual levels of responsibility increased and there was now a paper trail to prove when stories were assigned, when first drafts were due, when final drafts were due and, most importantly, whether each version was submitted by the deadline. The portfolios decreased the number of excuses for missing work and made my job much easier when it came time to supply a grade for their performance.

Naturally, some newspaper staff members resented this change. Students often enroll in newspaper class with no exposure to journalism whatsoever. Dale, a guidance counselor at my school, offered his perceptions on why kids sign up for it: "Fifty percent are at least interested . . . and have heard about it from friends in the class. They want to experiment and see if it's an interest, plus it doesn't hurt that their friends are in it" (personal communication, November 5, 2007). At times, it seemed as if the social appeal outweighed the journalistic. This did not mean that reluctant students disliked newspaper class or were incapable of producing high-quality work; it simply meant that their performance and productivity needed to rise to the level required to uphold the reputation of our award-winning student publication. They needed to be held accountable for their time and their responsibilities as members of a time-intensive, often hectic monthly collaborative effort. Maintaining a portfolio increased the work load of every student. On their surveys, several explicitly identified this as a negative result of keeping portfolios. Some students involved primarily in layout did not see a direct benefit to their own work. Even the student editors, who were very approving of the change, acknowledged the additional work load it would put on them as a potential downside.

Despite these complaints, which I had anticipated, almost every student I surveyed or interviewed believed the portfolios collectively benefited the class. All three of the newspaper's editors commented specifically on the positive effect using portfolios had on unorganized or unreliable students like John. The editors also appreciated the additional organization the portfolios gave them in managing over twenty student staff members; it is perhaps this benefit of the portfolios which helped the class most. The collaborative nature of the class ensured that no one on the staff worked in bubble; one student's work depended on another's. It is these expectations of timely submission and personal accountability on which I based my grading system of the portfolios. While the students in the class who showed a passion for journalism and who were willing to put in significant amounts of time producing the newspaper already displayed the level of accountability the portfolios required, they were in the minority. The rest of the class needed to produce a consistent amount of work on a predicable schedule and the organization of the portfolios was a significant step towards achieving this. My own observations, those of my editors, and comments on the newspaper student survey confirmed this.

Assertion 4: Newspaper students and I felt that portfolios benefited the entire class by holding staff members accountable for their time and especially helped reluctant students become more reliable and productive.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of my experiment with portfolios, I feel satisfied at the positive influence I found them to have over students in producing their newspaper. The class is very different from many others in high school in its chaotic and unpredictable nature. I thought that providing greater structure would help limit the disorder of newspaper production and that institutionalized reassurances would help limit anxiety for grade-conscious students. What surprised me most was how useful the newspaper students themselves found the portfolios in accelerating and streamlining the production process, confirming my own predictions and observations. I thought many of them would resent the change and its increased levels of accountability and expectations, which were a sharp departure from the culture of the program prior to my assuming its guidance.

Using the portfolio grading system was one of many changes that occurred in the class during my first year of advising. It was perhaps the most concrete structural change that I helped facilitate, but other, less tangible changes merit description as well. The newspaper staff had, for many years, a room all to themselves that was notorious for its clutter, gaudy student-painted walls, peculiar odor, and run-down atmosphere marked by pencils stuck in the ceiling tiles, stains on the carpet, and holes in the walls. While the old room was beloved by veteran student staff members, I felt that a change of venue would go well with the change in advisers, so I set up my current room as the newspaper room. The computers there were newer, and I taught two other classes in the same room, which meant the class had to stay organized and clean up after every work session.

I also limited the time students had to work on layout nights. Prior to my tenure as the newspaper adviser, students would come and go at will, and I heard rumors from students and faculty alike about questionable sobriety and misbehavior in darkened hallways late on Friday nights. I find such behavior abhorrent to my professional standards, and I did everything I could think of to discourage such illicit activity while preserving the best traditions of student production classes.

I believe the changes made in the class to encourage mature, productive, and professional behavior were largely successful for several reasons. Some returning students, when hearing of the change in advisers and rooms, did not reenroll in the class. Also, it became harder to pass the course and even more difficult to receive a high grade due to increased expectations and the inclusion of professionalism and deadlines as significant components of final grades. I also reminded students over and over again about the importance of their individual behavior both to preserve the reputation of their newspaper and to avoid punitive consequences for violating my own (or the school's) rules and standards of behavior.

I believe students also got a taste of how rewarding and fun it can be working with others who are just as excited, creative, and dynamic as themselves. Several layout times were surprisingly fun, both for the students and for me. Instead of scrambling to generate enough content to fill a page, I found students clustered around one computer monitor each trying to outdo the others on the best wording for a headline, for example. Often I would participate, playing the role of a skeptical adult reader. Our ideas and opinions would mix and evolve, and the sounds in the room during those times were of laughter, shouted bursts of inspiration, and the forceful stabbing of keys in frenzied typing. I loved my job on nights like those, and I believe the students knew something special was happening too.

It was one of those nights that led to our newspaper winning a significant national award. After our school's annual Tolo dance was cancelled for inappropriate dancing on a Saturday night, the newspaper staff had a brainstorming session the next Monday. They planned a special edition of the newspaper and worked on it after school and the next morning. They finished it on Tuesday afternoon, and I picked it up that night from the print shop for distribution on Wednesday morning to a very excited and avid student and faculty readership. That spring's national Journalism Education Association's convention was held in Denver, Colorado, and our Tolo dance issue was submitted in the "Special Edition" Best in Show competition category. Much to my surprise, as a first-year adviser taking students on an out-of-state trip for the first time, it was judged and awarded the first-place prize. My staff members and I were ecstatic, and I found it a fitting award for our editor-in-chief, David, who graduated that spring to study journalism at a small, private college in Northern California.

Action Plan

While the student editors and I agreed the portfolio was a positive change, there were some aspects I will amend for the future. Each story a staff member wrote required two signatures: one for the rough draft when it was submitted and one for the final. My editors felt this involved an unnecessary step, and next year a *final draft* will be defined as including an edited rough draft and only one signature will be required.

The resource potential of the portfolio was also under-utilized. For my next year's staff, I have prepared a month's worth of news-writing lessons and reference sheets that will stay in the portfolio the entire year. These include guides on caption writing, sports writing, eliminating excessive verbiage, and other common issues. It is my hope that students will use these during the writing of their stories, thereby freeing up more time for the editors to work on their tasks.

Advising the newspaper also exposed me to new software and technology of which I was previously unaware. Other future plans for the newspaper portfolios include possibly making them electronic. Our district is moving towards using *Google's* web-based software, which allows for user groups to share and edit documents such as news stories and photos collaboratively. Photographers could build an ongoing photo library throughout the year in *Picasa*, a photo-sharing tool. Coverage of sports events and community meetings could be scheduled and assigned using the *Google* calendar.

Stories could be submitted to *Google Docs* from any computer with Internet access and could be edited by any member of the newspaper staff. Taking the portfolios to a fully electronic, web-based format could extend the time and access to resources unconfined by the physical space of the newspaper room and our limited class time together. Also, with so much of our content stored electronically and online, the transition to our planned newspaper website would be much easier and would provide support for newer media formats such as pod-casting, interactive surveys, and blogging. This is the direction the professional press is moving and, as such, I feel I must allow my student journalists to explore as well.

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Appendix A

Portfolio User's Guide and Grading Rubrics

Dear new or returning *Sound* staff member:

To help make newspaper class time and layout nights more effective, task-oriented and productive, your teacher and editorial staff thought it wise to grade you using a portfolio system. The idea behind this is to help you keep track of your work, your deadlines, to help the editors and the adviser assess your effort and for you to leave newspaper with a physical document of your progress and growth in the field of journalism. Please read the following carefully. Failure to keep and update your portfolio will result in a failing grade in the class. There will be a total of 100 points possible per issue published. Portfolios will be evaluated the day immediately following the distribution of the paper.

Deadlines

Work must be submitted by the date and time and according to the procedures established by the editors. Thanks to modern technology, stories can still be submitted even if you, yourself, are not at school. Please send stories to: gosslere@peninsula.wednet.edu. Please take notes below on how work should be submitted to receive the full 30 points.

Quality of Work

Not only must work be submitted on time, it also must meet minimum requirements to receive full credit. Please record the standards expected from the editors on what constitutes a complete assignment and drafting process to receive the full 25 points.

Quantity of Work

The amount of work expected of each staff member varies on experience, area of expertise and availability of assignments. Please record the editors' expectations on how much work is expected of you to receive the full 25 points.

Professionalism

The reputation of a newspaper and the ability of staff members to rely upon each other, to focus and simply to enjoy working on a newspaper are highly dependent upon the maturity level of the staff. Please take notes on what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behavior during class time and during layout nights to know what is expected of you to receive the full 20 points.

Assignments and Deadlines Chart

As soon as you are assigned a story, a page to lay out, a photograph or any other task, record it on your rubric *immediately*. This chart is to help you keep track of your assignments and to show, without any confusion, whether or not you turned it in on time. Deadlines are set by a specific date and a time. This is to avoid any misunderstandings that might arise regarding whether a story is due at the beginning or end of a class period. When you submit a story or page on time, make sure to have your editor sign off that they received it and it's complete. Please record any specific instructions regarding deadlines here:

Extracurricular Time Log

Use this chart to keep track of all the time you spend outside of class working on newspaper assignments other than simply finishing stories as homework. Things like visiting an athletic event to take pictures, taking the mailing to the post office, or visiting a local business to solicit advertising all should go in this chart. Be sure to record all time spent at layout nights. Before leaving layout night, make sure to have your editor sign off that you have completed all the necessary work for that night's issue before leaving. **Leaving work unfinished that others need to finish theirs will severely affect your grade in multiple sections of the scoring rubric.**

Reflection

Take a few moments before submitting your portfolio to reflect upon your performance on the last issues. Help us, the editors and adviser, help you receive the training, materials, or resources that you feel you are lacking. Help us help you.

Portfolio Order

- Portfolio User's Guide (this sheet) on top
- Tab #1 – *Current Issue*
 - Scoring rubric
 - Any and all work produced for the current issue in progress, regardless of whether or not it's published
 - All edited rough drafts
- Tab #2 – *Previous Issues*
 - All work and corresponding scored rubrics from previous issues
- Tab #3 – *Reflection*
 - In chronological order, include the reflection sections from the scoring rubric
- Tab #4 – *Reference*
 - All handouts, class / meeting notes, worksheets, guides and diagrams that we give you to assist you in your work for the newspaper
- Tab #5 – *Forms*
 - Extra scoring rubrics and reflections. Forms are also available in the electronic *outbox* of your network account

Storage

Please keep your portfolio in the class at all times in the designated area. We may need access to your portfolio in your absence. Keep it here, so it's accessible and so it doesn't get lost.

(A special thanks is extended to Derek Smith, adviser of the Pacemaker Award-winning Peninsula *Outlook* student newspaper, for his gracious support in allowing me to adapt and include elements from portions of his program's grading rubric while I was in the process of designing my own. For that, Mr. Smith, I truly thank you.)

The Sound Grading Rubric

Name _____

Issue _____

Editor _____

Performance Task	Editor / Adviser Comments	Evaluation			
Deadlines (30 pts.) Work submitted by pre-determined date and time and in accordance with submission standards and protocol.		Overall Rating	You	Editor	Adviser
		Exceeds			
		Acceptable			
		Minimal			
		Poor			
		Adviser's Points _____			
Quality of Work (25 pts.) Submitted work has gone through proper drafting process. Stories and layouts show evidence of revision and continual improvement. Work adheres to journalistic standards and styles.		Overall Rating	You	Editor	Adviser
		Exceeds			
		Acceptable			
		Minimal			
		Poor			
		Adviser's Points _____			
Quantity of Work (25 pts.) Student fulfilled all assigned, individualized responsibilities for the issue. Student present at all layout sessions. Demonstrates evidence of work and time spent on newspaper outside of class time.		Overall Rating	You	Editor	Adviser
		Exceeds			
		Acceptable			
		Minimal			
		Poor			
		Adviser's Points _____			
Professionalism (20 pts.) Accepts responsibility for actions. Class time used productively. Demonstrates little to no need for supervision. Looks for additional tasks when finished or while waiting. Gets along with others.		Overall Rating	You	Editor	Adviser
		Exceeds			
		Acceptable			
		Minimal			
		Poor			
		Adviser's Points _____ (_____ /100)			

Assignments and Deadlines (include rough drafts)

Assignment (description)	Deadline	On Time? (Y/N)	Completed? (Y/N)	Editor Signature
	Date _____ Time _____			
	Date _____ Time _____			
	Date _____ Time _____			
	Date _____ Time _____			

Extracurricular Time Log (include layout nights)

Date	Time In	Time Out	Description	Editor Signature (required <i>before</i> <i>leaving</i> layout nights)

Appendix B

Issue Reflection

Strengths I demonstrated on this issue:

What is the one best thing you contributed this past issue?

Which pieces of the last issue are you least proud of, both individually and collectively?

What can we do better next time?

I need help/training/advice in the following areas to improve as a staff member:

Appendix C

Journalism Student Self-Administered Survey

Please read each question carefully and respond in an honest and serious manner. When done, please make sure this survey makes it back to Mr. Gossler. I thank you for your participation, and remember that you may skip any question or stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable proceeding.

1. Please rate your initial reaction to the switch to a portfolio-based assessment system in your Journalism class:

1	2	3	4	5
Dreading it		Didn't really care		Excited

2. Now, after publishing several issues using the portfolio system, how is your attitude towards them?

1	2	3	4	5
Prefer the previous system		Indifferent		Glad of the change

3. Do you feel more or less clear now on what is expected of you for each issue and to receive a particular grade?

1	2	3	4	5
Less clear		No change		More clear

4. How do you feel **your** submission of work prior to deadlines has been since we began using the portfolios?

1	2	3	4	5
More late submissions		No change		More on-time submissions

5. How do you feel **the staff as a whole** has met their deadlines since we began using the portfolios?

1	2	3	4	5
More late submissions		No change		More on-time submissions

6. Over the last few issues, do you think the number of errors and typos has increased or decreased?

1	2	3	4	5
More errors		No change		Fewer errors

7. How well were you able to meet the goals you set for yourself at the start of the publication process for each issue?

1	2	3	4	5
Usually did not meet my goals		Met my goals		Exceeded my goals

8. What feature of the portfolio did you find most helpful? Please explain.

9. What feature of the portfolio did you find least helpful? Please explain.

10. Overall, do you think the newspaper class benefited from using the portfolio assessment system? Why or why not? Were there any parts of the portfolio that were especially helpful or detrimental to the publication process?

11. Please reflect on layout night. Since we began using portfolios to submit and grade your work, do you think layout nights have been more or less productive?

12. Would you recommend that *The Sound* staff continue to use portfolios in the future? Why or why not? If so, do you have any comments or suggestion on how to make them more useful for staff members?

Appendix D

Non-Journalism Student Self-Administered Survey

Please read each question carefully and respond in an honest and serious manner. When done, please make sure this survey makes it back to Mr. Gossler. I thank you for your participation, and remember that you may skip any question or stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable proceeding.

What is your grade level? _____ How many years have you been reading *The Sound*? _____

1. Estimate how often you read the newspaper in the past few years.
 - a. Never
 - b. Once or twice a year
 - c. Three or four times a year
 - d. Most of the time
 - e. Every issue
2. Prior to this year, how *much* of the newspaper would you guess you actually read?
 - a. None of it
 - b. One or two articles that interested me
 - c. About half
 - d. Most of it
 - e. All of it, cover to cover
3. On a scale of one to five, please rate how interesting the paper was to you prior to this year.

1	2	3	4	5
Not interesting		Occasionally interesting		Always interesting
4. On a scale of one to five, please rate how you felt when a new issue of the paper arrived in your classroom prior to this year:

1	2	3	4	5
I didn't care		It was better than class work		Excited to read it
5. In general, how often did you notice distracting errors or mistakes while reading the paper prior to this year?
 - a. Never
 - b. Seldom
 - c. Regularly
 - d. Quite often
 - e. All the time
6. On a scale of one through five, please rate how "up to date" the articles in the newspaper were in past years:

1	2	3	4	5
Always "old news"		A mix		Very current
7. In past years, how interesting were the photos and graphics to you?
 - a. Not interesting
 - b. Somewhat interesting
 - c. Very interesting
10. Since the start of *this year*, how much of the newspaper would you guess you actually read?
 - a. None of it
 - b. One or two articles that interested me
 - c. About half
 - d. Most of it
 - e. All of it, cover to cover

11. On a scale of one to five, please rate how interesting the paper has been *this year*:

1	2	3	4	5
Not interesting		Occasionally interesting		Always interesting

12. On a scale of one to five, please rate how you felt when a new issue of the paper arrived in your classroom *this year*:

1	2	3	4	5
I didn't care		It was better than class work		Excited to read it

13. In general, how often have you noticed distracting errors or mistakes while reading the paper *this year*?

- a. Never
- b. Seldom
- c. Regularly
- d. Quite often
- e. All the time

14. On a scale of one through five, please rate how "up to date" the articles in the newspaper have been so far *this year*:

1	2	3	4	5
Always "old news"		A mix		Very current

15. So far this year, how interesting have the photos and graphics been to you?

- a. Not interesting
- b. Somewhat interesting
- c. Very interesting

16. Please comment below on any other changes or things in the paper that you have noticed are different this year:

Appendix E
Portfolios in a Journalism Class
Researcher: Ehren Gossler
Journalism Student Interview Protocol

1. What were your initial thoughts about keeping a portfolio this semester?
2. How did the reference materials included in the portfolio help you during the production process?
3. Did you find that keeping the portfolio and maintaining it ever competed for the time you needed to spend working directly on the paper?
4. Did you feel clear about what was expected of you to receive a particular grade? Does the portfolio make it more or less clear than before we started using them in class?
5. Overall, do you think using portfolios has helped the class and the publication process? How? Can you think of any examples or aspects of the class that have substantially improved as a result?
6. Did the written reflections help you notice or realize anything about your own abilities and work ethic? If so, can you give an example?
7. Do you think keeping every student more accountable for their time and work load made the production process more fair? If so, are there any specific examples you can think of?
8. Do you have any suggestions as to how the portfolio might be more useful for you or for other staff members?
9. What do you plan on doing with your portfolio after the semester and school year are over?

Portfolios in a Journalism Class
Researcher: Ehren Gossler
School Staff Member Interview Protocol

1. Have you read any issues of *The Sound* this year?
2. What do you think of the new graphics and layout format?
3. In the past few years, what do you think the newspaper's strengths have been? What about weaknesses?
4. Have you noticed any changes in the newspaper this year? If so, what kinds?
5. When seeing newspaper students out "on the beat," or taking photos outside of the classroom, how seriously do they seem to be taking their assignment? Have you had any discipline issues with newspaper students? Does this year's staff seem different when working from what you've witnessed?
6. When interviewed by newspaper students for a story, how would you describe their conduct? Would you say this year's students are more, or less, professional and focused than students in recent years?
7. How would you describe the overall "tone" of this year's *The Sound*? How has it changed?
8. What types of articles do you think staff and administration find personally interesting? Have you seen more or fewer of these this year?
9. Do the news stories seem more or less "fresh" and current than in previous years?
10. Overall, how professional has our newspaper staff and publication been this year? Is this different than in previous years?
11. In what ways would you like to see *The Sound* change or improve? Do you think we are moving in that direction right now? What actions might you suggest we take?

Appendix G
Washington State University Consent Form

PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT OF NEWSPAPER CLASS

Researcher: Ehren Gossler, Newspaper Adviser
Career and Technical Education Department
Gig Harbor High School, (253) 540 -1545

Researchers' statement

I am asking for your permission for your child to participate in a research study. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to allow your child to participate in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what we would ask your child to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a parent, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When we have answered all your questions, you can decide if you want your child to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." We will give you a copy of this form for your records.

PURPOSE AND BENEFITS

In order to more fairly and accurately assess student work while producing the monthly student-run newspaper, *The Sound*, each student will create and maintain a portfolio of all work produced for class, regardless of whether or not it sees publication. **All students, regardless of their participation in the optional interviews and surveys, will be required to keep and maintain the work they produce for the newspaper in a portfolio to receive a passing grade.** I hope that keeping this portfolio will help students become better self-managers of their time and responsibilities and to increase on-time submission of stories and graphics to minimize wasted class and "paste-up" time. I hope that this change will result in a paper of higher quality, and allow for each student to showcase their hard work and fully realize their unique role as a staff member or editor of *The Sound*.

PROCEDURES

After implementing the portfolio assessment system, and following it through the publication of at least two issues, I will distribute self-administered surveys to the newspaper staff on the effectiveness of the portfolio grading system as well as to students not enrolled in newspaper class who will be asked to provide feedback on any perceived changes in the paper's quality. I will also interview individual students whose work presents unique challenges in assessing. The types of questions I will ask will be used to determine whether or not students in my newspaper class felt clear about class expectations and their opinions on the fairness of my assessment and grading of their work. Students not enrolled in newspaper class will be asked to provide feedback via a self-administered survey on any perceived changes in the paper's quality. I will interview other staff and administrators on their perceptions of the newspaper's quality

and of the work ethic and behavior of students in the newspaper class. Additionally, I will be conducting observations during class time and layout nights to note changes in student behavior and productivity and assessing their portfolios for changes in timeliness of story and graphics submissions and overall quality of work.

RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT

As with any research study, your child will be placed in unique circumstances. To minimize any discomfort or stress your child may experience when answering survey questions or while being interviewed one-on-one by me, the researcher, I will continually stress the optional nature of the study. Your child is free to participate or not and may decline to answer any interview or survey question at any time.

Please return this form by February 21, 2007

Printed name of researcher

Signature of researcher

Date

Subject's statement

This study has been explained to me. I give my permission for my child to be approached and invited and, if s/he agrees, to participate in this study. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have general questions about the research, I can ask the researcher listed above. If I have questions regarding my rights as a participant, I can call the WSU Institutional Review Board at (509) 335-9661. This project has been reviewed and approved for human participation by the WSU IRB. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

Printed name of subject's parent

Signature of subject's parent

Date

Appendix H

Washington State University Assent Form

PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT OF NEWSPAPER CLASS

Researcher: Ehren Gossler, Newspaper Adviser
Career and Technical Education Department
Gig Harbor High School, (253) 540 -1545

I am doing a research study about using portfolios to keep track of staff members' newspaper assignments to make sure that everyone is clear about what they're working on and that I am grading you fairly. A research study is a way to learn more about people. While every student will keep and maintain a portfolio of their work, and receive a grade based upon the work they produce and document within its pages, participation in the research study is purely optional. If you decide that you want to be part of this study, you will be asked to provide your opinions about the newspaper class by completing a short survey and reflecting on your work in newspaper class in writing as part of your portfolio. I also will interview several individual students in the class. The students I will interview are those whose work presents a particular challenge when assessing for class points. After implementing the portfolio assessment system, and following it through the publication of at least two issues, I will distribute self-administered surveys to the newspaper staff on the effectiveness of the portfolio grading system as well as to students not enrolled in newspaper class who will be asked to provide feedback on any perceived changes in the paper's quality. I will interview other staff and administrators on their perceptions of the newspaper's quality and of the work ethic and behavior of students in your newspaper class. Additionally, I will be conducting observations during your class time and layout nights to note changes your behavior and productivity. Finally, I will be assessing your portfolios for changes in timeliness of story and graphics submissions and overall quality of your work, whether or not it's published in *The Sound*.

There are some things about this study you should know. There are procedures that may make you nervous, like answering a short survey or talking one-on-one with your teacher. You may choose not to participate or decline to answer any question at any time and that's OK. Your grade will not be affected as a result. Overall, this research study should not make you any more nervous than the type of work that your newspaper class does every day.

Not everyone who takes part in this study will benefit. A benefit means that something good happens to you. We think these benefits might be that you are more clear on what type of work is expected of you and when it is due so that the newspaper is of higher quality and you know exactly what you need to do in order to receive a particular grade.

When we are finished with this study we will write a report about what was learned. This report will not include your name or that you were in the study. You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to be. If you decide to stop after we begin, that's OK, too.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the WSU Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher at (253) 530-1545. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the WSU IRB at 509-335-9661. If you decide you want to be in this study, please sign your name.

I, _____, want to be in this research study.
(Print your name here)

(Sign your name here)

(Date)

Appendix I
Verbal Assent Script for Self-Administered Survey

PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT OF NEWSPAPER CLASS

Researcher: Ehren Gossler

Researcher: In a few moments, I will pass out a short survey that is designed to give me feedback on the quality of the newspaper here at Gig Harbor High School, *The Sound*, for which I serve as the teacher/adviser. Participation in this survey is completely optional and should take only a few minutes to complete. Your answers will be completely anonymous. Should you choose not to participate in this survey, your grade will not be affected in any way. If there are any questions you wish not to answer, that is just fine as well. You may stop at any time should you wish not to continue further. If you do choose to complete the survey, please read each question thoroughly and respond in a serious and mature manner. Your opinions will be taken very seriously and will impact the publication process of the newspaper.

I will now distribute the surveys. If you choose not to participate, simply pass the stack of surveys to the next student and work on a class assignment.

Are there any questions before we begin?