

# **A Rhetoric of Reflection**

*Edited by*

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### The Perils of Standing Alone

#### Reflective Writing in Relationship to Other Texts

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MICHAEL NEAL

I was introduced to reflection through cover letters that accompanied student writing portfolios in the '90s when I was first entering the field. At that time portfolios, it seemed to me, were already established as a best practice in the teaching of writing, specifically as the most trustworthy and theoretically informed way of assessing student writing ([Belanoff 1994](#); [Belanoff and Dickson 1991](#); [Black, Daiker, Sommers, and Stygall 1994](#); [Elbow 1994](#); [Yancey 1992](#)). For me it wasn't a matter of *if* but *how* I would use portfolios in my composition classes, and my biggest challenge was finding a bag large enough to haul around the heavy load of binders that included multiples drafts of every paper students produced in the class—the weightiness of how much students produce in a given semester now having been largely lost in the ePortfolio era. And it went without saying that each portfolio was to be introduced by the ubiquitous reflective cover letter. In this context, reflection took on the generic conventions of an introduction of the students' writing to the reader/assessor, providing a context for the pieces included in the portfolio. In my own teaching at that time, since portfolios were used to advocate for and assess a student's writing process over the product, a reflective cover letter narrated a student's development as a writer over a period of time, usually a

semester, though I did have some early exposure to program and other large-scale portfolio contexts that went beyond the time and space boundaries of a semester-long course.

As a new teacher, the idea that I could wait until the end of the semester to grade the students' writing and that I would grade the body of work as a whole rather than assess the individual pieces was exhilarating and terrifying, and I often hedged the assessment by assigning grades along the way as much to put my mind at ease as to respond to my evaluation-obsessed students. It felt like breaking the rules to respond without grading along the way. In the early days of my using portfolios, while I examined many aspects of the process and assessment mechanism, I don't remember doubting the legitimacy or value of the reflective cover letter. This letter seemed in many ways the anchor for the portfolio, and its value lay in the relationship between the reflection and the other artifacts in the portfolio. Sometimes the reflections seemed coherent with the other pieces in the portfolio, but at other times I noticed a troubling inconsistency: what some students wrote in their reflections wasn't consistent with what I read in the rest of the portfolio, which led to me to question their development as writers. This disconnect was troubling for me as a composition teacher, who had no doubts that student writers were always developing, but who also thought that articulation of their writing was a vital component of that development. Thus, I described the cover letter as a document that made specific, measureable claims about the student's writing that should be supported by evidence in the other texts. The two parts of the portfolio—and I understood them as parts at that time—were linked in the logic of their performance. At least in classroom portfolio assessment, I saw the reflection as inseparable from the other artifacts in the portfolio. Case closed.

Over the past twenty years of teaching, reading, and administrating in the field, my understanding of reflection and portfolios has evolved, as has the field's. Reflection is more nuanced and complex than I

understood. It appears in written form, but it's also contemplative, visual, spatial, gestural, or multimodal. In addition, reflection is no longer inextricably linked to portfolios in my practice: I often have students reflect on multiple processes and decisions outside of portfolio work, and I don't insist on portfolios having a general cover letter . . . in fact, I discourage it, as I explain later. In part, I was helped along by Kathleen Blake [Yancey's Reflection in the Writing Classroom \(1998\)](#), which challenged me to consider reflection beyond the panacea of portfolio assessment and to theorize a practice many others in the field and I had already embraced. Building on the work of Donald Schon, Yancey delineated three types of reflection: "reflection-in-action," "constructive reflection," and "reflection-in-presentation." In my pedagogy, I'm particularly drawn to reflection-in-presentation because it acknowledges multiple potential audiences for the reflection as well as genres, contexts, and other features. To me reflection-in-presentation seems the most consistent with the kind of writing and thinking in which students engage while constructing reflective texts for portfolios. In defining and theorizing reflection in its contemporary state, Yancey draws on several key principles and foundational thinkers: John Dewey's tacit knowledge as well as Schon's distinction between reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. In the end, through these understandings, what we have are practices that reproduce values often espoused in the field through portfolio and even ways of action, as indicated, for example, in George [Hillocks's \(1995\) Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice](#), which encourages reflexivity for teachers of writing and for their students.

Even though reflection is not understood exclusively as a written text or a portfolio text, we have seen both the reemergence of portfolio theory and practice in terms of ePortfolios in the past several years through digital technologies and an increased emphasis on large-scale writing assessment in a time of educational accountability. The issue I thus explore in this chapter is the continued relationship—if any—between reflective texts and other artifacts in the contemporary era of

portfolio assessment. Specifically, I look at two issues central in the current context: (1) challenges leveled at reflective writing as a form of self-assessment and (2) the reflective text as the single scored piece of writing, as advocated in Phase 2 portfolio assessment ([White 2005](#)). Put in the form of questions, my chapter asks:

- What are the relationships between reflective writing and other artifacts within a portfolio?
- What—if any—value remains in guiding students into specific reflective writing activities, either for teaching and learning or for the purposes of writing assessment?

In addressing these questions, my intent is to reaffirm the important relationship between reflective writing and portfolio artifacts—though not in limited, formulaic cover letters, but rather as integrated learning tools for students to make evident tacit decisions they make as writers.

### **A Brief and Selective History of Reflective Writing in Portfolios**

Until [Yancey's \(1998\)](#) *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*, reflection in composition was frequently tied to assessment, which often included self-evaluation. As portfolios were embraced more widely at all educational levels, reflection remained a central practice and text, but it was often seen as little more than an introductory letter to the more substantial artifacts in the portfolio ([Anson 1994](#)). Educators advocated for portfolios—even in large-scale writing assessment systems—as a fix-all for a myriad of problems they associated with student writing because portfolios seemed to embody values central to the field at that time: encouraging writing process and revision, allowing for collaboration, promoting pedagogical diversity, and challenging grade inflation and students' obsession with grades ([Belanoff 1994](#); [Belanoff and Elbow 1991](#); [Bishop 1990](#); [Murphy 1994](#); [Sommers 1989](#)).

Portfolios included three primary components—collection, selection, and reflection; each had a role, but they largely functioned in

relationship to one another to make a coherent whole ([Yancey 1998](#)). The collection element, simply put, is that portfolios consist of more than a single artifact, a significant move away from assessing one piece of writing and assuming it provides a useful index to a student's abilities. Just as important, though, is that as writing outcomes and competencies require negotiating multiple contexts, portfolios allow students to include a range of work to demonstrate their flexibility and abilities to work across genres, contexts, and situations. This multiplicity also allows portfolios on a larger scale to include samples from across the curriculum and from outside the academy. A look at the WPA Outcomes Statement and the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing reveals how important multiplicity is to the way we understand our writing and its instruction:

***from the WPA Outcomes (emphasis mine)***

- Respond to the needs of *different audiences*.
- Respond appropriately to *different kinds of rhetorical situations*.
- Write in several genres.
- Learn common formats for *different kinds of texts*.
- Use a variety of technologies to address a *range of audiences*.

(<http://wpacouncil.org/positions/outcomes.html>)

***from the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing (emphasis mine)***

- *Flexibility*, or the ability to *adapt to situations, expectations, or demands*, and
- Abilities to compose in *multiple environments*, from using traditional pen and paper to electronic technologies

(<http://wpacouncil.org/framework>)

In order for portfolios to demonstrate such a broad range of writing situations and contexts, they must include artifacts from an equally broad range of contexts and situations. How would a student

demonstrate using “a variety of technologies to address a range of audiences” with a single artifact (e.g., a Prezi) or by including multiple, word-processed assignments? Since many of the outcomes and frameworks require this type of flexibility, effective portfolios must include a variety of artifacts as well. An additional motive for collecting multiple artifacts for a portfolio is that in such a vehicle, students can create longitudinal evidence of their learning and development for their own benefit as well as to present to others (e.g., faculty, administrators, employers, graduate schools, etc.).

In addition to the portfolio’s being a collection of artifacts, it is supposed to be a selection of artifacts as well. Without selection, the portfolio can become an unmanageable mass of artifacts: instead, student writers are charged with choosing from their larger body of work to demonstrate a range of competencies. Inasmuch as students understand the audiences and purposes of the portfolio, they can make informed selections and in so doing demonstrate their range of thinking, abilities, and rhetorical savvy. Not least, such students may internalize the values of the portfolio in ways that can be advantageous to them moving forward with their work.

A final piece to this traditional portfolio trifecta is reflection, which may take on a variety of forms and functions within a portfolio. As previously noted, portfolio reflection has often been understood as synonymous with a cover letter; however, this doesn’t need to be case. Any type of writing that comments on a writer’s processes, includes self-assessment, or provides rationale for choices either in the collection or selection principles above or about individual artifacts can be considered reflection. The question at hand in this chapter is what role reflection can and should play in the assessment of a portfolio—and whether it is even necessary in contemporary iterations of portfolios. Is a portfolio even a portfolio if it does not include a reflective element? Although I’m less convinced that a portfolio needs

to include reflection, certain types of reflection can play an important role in student writing as well as its assessment.

While collection, selection, and reflection remained the foundational aspects of portfolio literature and practice, as the field became more critical of portfolio assessment, so did our view of reflection. Once portfolio assessment became so ubiquitous it was being presented as the solution for seemingly every writing situation and problem ([Callahan 2000](#)), strong voices in the field warned against the utopianism of portfolio assessment, pointing out problems, including the practice of scoring rather than reading portfolios ([Broad 1994](#)) and the drawbacks of holistically scoring a portfolio ([Elbow 1994](#)). [Murphy and Grant \(1996\)](#) comment on the rise of portfolio popularity in the '80s and the pitfalls that often accompany such widespread acceptance: "Since the mid-1980s, as educators have become increasingly dissatisfied with traditional assessment measures, there has been an escalating interest in portfolio assessment, so much so that portfolio assessment is now in danger of becoming the latest educational bandwagon. Yet bandwagons, however alluring and brightly lit, have been known to ensnare rather than transport the unsuspecting rider" (284). The same cycle brought into relief how the initial expectations for reflection were being diminished. Initially, the field's interest in reflection communicated similar high expectations; it was supposed to

- encourage metacognition;
- make pedagogy more dialogic;
- help students assume control of their own development as writers;
- enable students to develop their own voices;
- improve the quality of written assignments and students' grades;
- help students become more independent judges of their own writing;

- enable teachers to see how students read and interpret assignments and other class activities, as well as how students construct teacher expectations; and
- integrate literacy learning and authentic writing with assessment.

Anything in the field with this level of optimism is bound to be tempered to some degree in time, but I include this list to show how enthusiastic we were and how well reflective writing matched our goals with the goals of the community. It seemed a perfect fit for both our values and the problems we faced with student learning and assessment.

Perhaps most important in the rationale for portfolio reflection is the connection between reflection and self-assessment. In fact, the two became so closely related they were often used interchangeably and thus are difficult to distinguish from one another. Much of the criticism that gets leveled against reflective writing might actually be a critique of self-assessment within the context of assessment decisions. Perhaps the most significant contribution to our understanding of self-assessment in rhetoric and composition circles is Jane Bowman Smith and Kathleen Blake Yancey's edited collection *Self-Assessment and Development in Writing* ([Smith and Yancey 2000](#)). Linking pedagogy and reflection, Thomas L. Hilgers, Edna L. Hussey, and Monica Stitt-Bergh's opening chapter, "The Case for Prompted Self-Assessment in the Writing Classroom," points to targeting two specific areas to prompt reflective writing: cognitive growth and procedural skills ([Hilgers, Hussey, and Stitt-Bergh 2000](#), 15–18). The first, cognitive growth, includes new understandings about writers and writing, writers' evaluation of their own strengths and weaknesses as writers, and even goal setting for future drafts or projects. The second area—procedural skills—prompts students to think about what obstacles they encounter and how they resolve them. In both cases, the authors argue, students need to be guided by prompts toward the most useful and significant

areas to affect the pedagogical outcomes of the activity. In the same collection, Chris M. Anson writes about a writing pedagogy based on reviewing audio reflections, which indicate that the metacommentaries (or reflective self-assessment) of strong students reveal a level of control of their texts, even if those texts have other problems; in contrast, weaker students demonstrate a kind of passivity or abdication of control of their texts ([Anson 2000](#), 69) Anson's recommendation is that in responding, faculty should not take over the decision making for the students' texts, especially for struggling writers, a concern echoed by others as well, including Irwin [Weiser \(1992\)](#) in "Portfolio Practice and Assessment for Collegiate Basic Writers" and Cheryl [Forbes \(1996\)](#) in "Cowriting, Overwriting, and Overriding in Portfolio Land Online." While reflection is certainly not the only place where such usurpation of students' texts takes place, it is one such place, and thus the motives for assigning and responding to student reflection must be carefully considered. At the same time it is important to say that just because some reflective writing situations lead to this type of takeover, it isn't necessarily the case in all models of response.

### **The Portfolio Cover Letter as a Formulaic Performance**

The most consistent criticism of reflective writing centers on the hollowness of the reflective writing in educational and assessment contexts (for examples, see [Bower 2003](#); [Murray 2009](#); [O'Neill 2002](#); [Scott 2005](#); [Sommers 2011](#)). For instance, Joddy Murray, in *Non-Discursive Rhetoric: Image and Affect in Multimodal Composition*, suggests that reflection—which he equates with self-assessment—does not live up to its promise: "Often touted as the panacea of assessment, self-assessment may not be as useful as some writing teachers might think, especially in terms of helping students to see the potential in the writing they do while, simultaneously, helping them to value the dynamic nature of most multimodal writing in new media today. Though reflection is for the most part a valuable exercise, it must be

combined with a rigorous method of self-assessment that connects the process elements with the end product in such a way as to discourage any notions of rigidity or finality” ([Murray 2009](#), 186). While I agree with Murray that reflective texts should be read rhetorically, evaluating their own work is difficult for many students, especially if they haven’t defined or internalized criteria for making such value judgments, a point underscored in a study conducted by Joe Cirio. Interested in whether or not students could participate in devising scoring guides, [Cirio \(2014\)](#) found that the first-year composition students he interviewed did not have the vocabulary they would need to articulate criteria, and without those, they were unable to assess their own writing. Moreover, self-evaluation is only one form of reflective writing, one that can be the trickiest ethically, as the collection on self-assessment edited by [Smith and Yancey \(2000\)](#) demonstrates. Put simply, it is too easy to locate a single problem with reflection and then make a sweeping generalization about its effectiveness based on that weakness.

In fact, it’s interesting to contrast Murray’s approach and conclusions with how Rachel [Ihara \(2014\)](#), Lindsey [Harding \(2014\)](#), and Peggy [O’Neill \(2002\)](#) separately address potential problems of reflective writing being coercive or disingenuous. In a study published in *TETYC* (and as also discussed by Jeff Sommers, this volume), Ihara reports on the extent to which students feel “compelled to construct a narrative of growth” (226) in their reflective writing; Ihara finds that most of the students in the study want to be “honest” in their reflections. At the same time, Ihara is troubled that these same students have a hard time presenting textual evidence of their learning and that most fail to recognize the external audience for the reflection, instead seeing this text principally as a piece of writing more for themselves than for the reader. In that same issue of *TETYC*, Harding develops an approach guiding students to what she calls more “genuine intellectual reflection” (241–42) through a system of guided questions as a strategy to mitigate challenges of open-ended reflections leading to vague

generalities. O’Neill makes the same turn in her work, pointing out the potential pitfall of putting too much weight on reflective texts but offering suggestions to make this writing more valuable: “The products and processes of reflection in these different contexts have the potential to become empty, formulaic rituals producing predictable texts that can function as a subtle means of controlling—and constructing to some extent—students. . . . Incorporating reflection ethically requires more than just adding a cover letter or a reflective essay because students need to be taught what we mean by reflection, how to generate reflective texts, and how to evaluate them as processes and products” (n.p.). For the remainder of her article, that’s exactly how O’Neill proceeds, articulating principles—much along the lines of the Smith and Yancey collection—that guide students toward productive reflective writing: reviewing the reasons for including reflective writing, avoiding using a single genre for reflection such as the reflective letter, having a number of varied reflection activities, allowing students to keep some reflection private, teaching reflective texts as a rhetorical genres, constructing prompts carefully, and being conscious of ourselves as readers of reflective texts. O’Neill’s argument is leveled at a number of problems with reflective cover letters: the problem is not so much with the reflective acts or texts as it is with the forms and purposes they take on—especially as they become formulaic—and the lack of authentic context for this writing exercise. O’Neill is especially concerned, it appears, that teachers will adopt a single generic reflective prompt and genre (the cover letter) without variance, which can further encourage and enable formulaic responses to the assignment, in which case the assignment will become exactly what the goals of reflection work against: a shallow, perfunctory response that is meaningless to teachers and students alike.

That worst-case scenario of reflective writing is what Tony Scott finds in his study of high-school students’ reflective-cover-letter writing ([Scott 2005](#)), which he sees as part of the bureaucratic culture of top-down educational reform in the state of Kentucky at that time. Scott

critiques the genre—specifically in the context of the portfolio cover letter—as a manipulative force for writers: “Genres are therefore often not only regulative of texts, they are constitutive of activities and social orders” (9). The generic purpose he discovers through his investigation of this portfolio assessment is that the reflective cover letters—80 percent of which claim growth for the writer—keep the teachers aware of and accountable to state expectations, provide a simple formula for students to follow without spending much time or having any investment in the process, and validate the curriculum (25–26).

With these conclusions regarding the performativity of reflection in portfolio assessment, it is hard not to become cynical of or want to dismiss reflection as whole. Despite these critiques, it appears that the field isn’t abandoning reflection or even reflective texts in portfolios. Many of the newer and continuing portfolio models include reflection as part of the system and assessment. Despite the challenges, reflective writing endures, including its use in large-scale assessment models. Moreover one of these models—Phase 2 portfolios—assesses the reflective writing in a portfolio exclusively, which makes it an interesting case to explore in further detail.

### **Considering Only the Reflective Cover Letters in Phase 2 Portfolio Assessment**

Taking a distinctly different position on the value of reflective cover letters, Edward M. White introduced Phase 2 portfolio assessment in “The Scoring of Writing Portfolios: Phase 2” ([White 2005](#)), long into the debates over the relative value of reflective writing. Citing reflection as a primary strength in portfolio assessment, White developed a large-scale assessment model in which raters score portfolios based almost exclusively on the reflective letter (582–83). In this system, faculty develop a list of educational goals or outcomes for students to demonstrate, and the students respond with a reflective cover letter

that shows how they have exhibited these outcomes in portfolio artifacts. The portfolio artifacts are not reviewed unless a rater chooses to engage in a “quick skimming” (593) of a cited piece of evidence. This model brings holistic scoring back to a single writing sample, which White notes was its original use; in fact, he challenges the appropriateness of using holistic scoring on a portfolio with multiple pieces of writing for the scorer to consider. As evidence of the effectiveness of Phase 2 portfolio assessment, White points to the efficiency of scoring, which in a Phase 2 model increases from two portfolios an hour to ten or more, ostensibly with substantial agreement (594). Many are familiar with claims of efficiency and reliability, and despite the many arguments to the contrary (see, among others, [Broad 2003](#); [Huot 1990, 2002](#); [Williamson 1994](#)), claims such as these appeal to pragmatists whose primary concerns are cost and subjectivity in scoring.

In his article explaining Phase 2 portfolio scoring, White makes a validity claim I would like to examine in closer detail: “[Phase 2 portfolio scoring] supports student learning by requiring self-assessment and responsibility, provides direct information to faculty on the outcomes of their programs, and uses existing documents in a new way that is demonstrably direct and valid” (2000, 594). Without rehashing the entire volume of scholarship on validity, I’ll remind the reader that validity is a measure of degree—not a yes/no evaluation—of the accuracy and appropriateness of decisions made based on the results of a test ([Messick 1989](#); [Moss 1994](#); [Shepard 1993](#)). Therefore, the question isn’t, is Phase 2 portfolio assessment valid? but rather, to what degree are decisions made on the basis of Phase 2 portfolio scoring accurate and appropriate?” The answer to this question is context specific. Because educational decisions are the focus of a validity argument (not based on the test by itself), we cannot determine the degree of validity outside of its use, but let’s assume for a moment that the purpose of this assessment model is a course grade, a program assessment, a placement decision, an exit decision, or an

admissions decision. Even with this hypothetical range, we can start to unpack the value of Phase 2 portfolio scoring.

### *Relative Strengths*

As White points out, Phase 2 portfolio scoring is faster and thus less expensive than reading full portfolios. While this isn't the most important criterion for test validity, I'd be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that assessment models must be sustainable and that cheaper, faster models are easier to sell to administrators in a time when educational funding continues to be limited. In addition, and as White points out, Phase 2 assessment is a direct assessment ([White 2005](#), 594): the scorers are making a decision about student writing while reading a sample of student writing. While many other writing-assessment models are indirect measures, Phase 2 portfolio assessment considers student writing, a virtue most in the field would support. In addition, *if the reflection is done well*, it can achieve some of the initial goals laid out by early proponents of reflection and reflective writing: "When a student introduces a portfolio with serious reflection about it, the student is taking responsibility for the quality of the work, the choices that were involved in the writing, and the learning that has occurred—or not occurred. It is a powerful metacognitive act—thinking about thinking—that no other assessment device includes" (583)—a point many portfolio scholars have made. Also like others, as we have seen, White is quick to concede that without proper instruction "students are likely to give a hasty overview of the portfolio contents, including much personal experience about the difficulty of writing and revising—along with some fulsome praise of the teacher—without attending to the goals of the program at all" (591). So White's conclusions, while advocating for the scoring of portfolios via reflective writing, acknowledge the misgivings about reflective letters that [O'Neill \(2002\)](#), [Scott \(2005\)](#), and others might level. His solution, to prompt students to respond to faculty-produced goals and outcomes, however, does not

address Scott's findings that the letters largely become a hollow affirmation of the curriculum. The kinds of goal and outcome statements White includes in the appendices seem to be exactly the kind that Scott would find disingenuous that O'Neill would critique as being too stable and thus absent from instruction.

### *Relative Weaknesses*

While acknowledging certain benefits of the Phase 2 scoring model, we must also account for its weaknesses when considering its degree of validity when used within particular contexts. Since validity has three main components—accuracy, appropriateness, and consequences—I'll expand on them in that order. According to [White \(2005\)](#), the *accuracy* of Phase 2 scoring is based on score reliability, but what reliability means isn't explained. Reliability is a measure of consistency. Is White's claim one of interrater reliability—that two people scoring the same reflective letter will give the same score—or that of consistency of scores between a whole-portfolio reading and one in which only the reflective text is read? If the former, it is not surprising that two raters with equally limited access to the full portfolio would give the same score: the simpler and more limited the text being assessed, the better chance for calibration and agreement. The latter would be more convincing if fully read portfolios were given the same scores as those given only the reflective letters, but that isn't clear. The history of writing assessment is riddled with similar claims that what is being measured is equivalent to looking at a full, authentic writing sample.

This leads to the *appropriateness* of making decisions about students based only on reading the reflective letter. To what degree is it appropriate to have students assemble a full portfolio if assessors only read and assess the opening letter? It seems duplicitous to require students to put time and effort into something assessors would spend so little time on. In addition, the educational *consequences* aren't hard

to imagine. Students' understanding of how the portfolio is (or isn't) being read to score undermines the value of the portfolio itself. As students learn to beat the test, portfolio assessment is clearly one kind of assessment students could easily game and for which they would replicate hollow generic conventions, much in the way Scott suggests of the Kentucky model. In addition, in Phase 2 portfolio assessment we lose the most basic values of portfolio assessment that drew us to it in the first place. Do we really want to move back to a single writing sample when outcomes and goals for college writing have become more nuanced? I would hate to lose gains we have made in writing assessment by voluntarily retreating to a single sample of writing whose genre isn't necessarily clear and that often doesn't fulfill the same outcomes or goals as other artifacts in the portfolio.

My own experience with portfolio assessment suggests a different problem with considering only the reflective writing in a portfolio assessment. Over the past nine years I have worked with a cross-disciplinary faculty on a portfolio assessment that occurs after students' first year of college in which they submit (1) samples of writing from their coursework, (2) an essay written outside of class, and (3) a reflective letter that responds to prompts about their writing. Even though we have adjusted the description of and prompts for the reflective text multiple times, the reflective letters have remained frustratingly inconsistent and are often an anomaly compared to the other artifacts in the portfolio. For one thing, students underestimate the value and challenge of producing such a text. For another, too often students don't see composing the reflection as an integral part of the portfolio process—even though the faculty do—resulting in the letter's often being the shallowest portion of the portfolio. Moreover, since the reflective text is holistic and the portfolio isn't produced in a single class, there are limited opportunities to guide students through meaningful reflection activities and revisions that would help them effectively develop a substantial reflective text.

White has a point that holistic scoring may be difficult to use on portfolios because assigning a single judgment to a group of artifacts with varying strengths and weaknesses is often challenging. Even using a scoring guide with multiple categories for evaluation is tough when texts within the portfolio vary in quality. While the system I'm describing uses both a holistic score (pass and resubmit) and a scoring guide to explain strengths and weaknesses of the writing to students, we decided early in the process to break out categories within the scoring guide for the reflective writing because those texts were often so inconsistent with the other writing in the portfolio. Even after nearly a decade of using and revising the reflection prompts and description, we've still decided to keep those parts of the scoring separate. If I were to suggest Phase 2 portfolio scoring to this group of experienced portfolio readers, they would rightly resist: the assumption that the reflective texts in a portfolio read in isolation will mirror the other artifacts is too big a leap for those experienced in evaluating portfolio reflections. Each piece of writing is unique, and the reflective texts are especially so because they have different purposes, audiences, and exigencies than the other artifacts in the portfolio. Without stronger support, it's not clear that the reflections read alone will be representative of the other writing. Reading and evaluating multiple texts is the very essence of portfolio assessment, and without it, the theory of portfolio assessment is significantly undermined.

If we're interested in moving back to single-sample writing assessments, we need to craft an argument around that practice rather than pretending that pulling a single sample of writing out of a portfolio to assess it maintains the validity of the assessment. In many ways that's exactly what White suggests in his article: that evaluating multiple samples of writing in a single score is too difficult and that we should return to a single sample. If that's so, however, we shouldn't call that evaluation method portfolio assessment. And even were I making this argument—which I am not—I certainly wouldn't use the reflective writing sample in a portfolio as the scored single text because of how it

is thus repositioned. The reflective text in a portfolio is created to situate, to be in dialogue with, and to be in response to the other portfolio texts. Thus, it doesn't make sense as a reader or assessor to isolate that text for the assessment. And of course, there is the question of the ethics of requiring students to develop a full portfolio with reflection without actually reading the full portfolio or their knowing that the full portfolio won't be read. How long will it be before students and teachers understand that the full portfolio isn't being read? What do we expect they'll do when they find out? What does that do to our ethos as teachers of writing? Stated simply, Phase 2 portfolio assessment exerts a three-pronged effect, undermining (1) the portfolio reading, (2) the value of reflection in relationship to other pieces in the portfolio, and (3) our own credibility as writing assessors.

### **Conclusions: The Abandonment of Reflective Writing?**

When positioned as part of a portfolio, reflective writing is most usefully understood as a *confirmational* text ([Anson 2000](#)), one in which its dialogue and relationship with other texts is *necessary* to be meaningful. This is an important distinction in light of what I see as two disparate positions in the scholarship on reflective writing in portfolios: abandoning reflection altogether as [Murray \(2009\)](#) or [Scott \(2005\)](#) might suggest or relying on it disproportionately for the assessment as White does in his Phase 2 model. Scott's research demonstrates how disappointing reflective letters in portfolios can be since they can tend toward superficial curricular affirmation; at the same time, his study took place in a very different model than the one characterizing most in composition studies—the context of state-wide K–12 assessment, in which the political origins and implementation of the portfolio system threatened the process from the outset. To dismiss reflective writing in this context dismisses the value reflection adds to an assessment system in others. At the other end of the continuum, White's wholesale acceptance of the isolated reflective cover letters raises significant

concerns. While I appreciate the nod toward portfolio assessment, scoring reflective letters alone—especially given the critiques—doesn't acknowledge or address the relationship between reflection and other texts within the portfolios, especially in cases in which the reflection is positioned to be in dialogue with the artifacts in the portfolio. Portfolio reflective texts are not intended to be read or understood in isolation, which raises questions about the propriety of any reading or scoring that strips them of their fuller context.

There is a different way to position reflective writing in relationship to portfolios and assessment that values the role reflection can play without leveraging too much on unsubstantiated claims. When evaluating portfolios, readers can consider reflection as arguments or claims students make about their writing that are substantiated when accompanied by evidence, support, examples, explications, illuminations, and so on that appear in the portfolio artifacts. Claims without evidence are mere sentiments, while evidence without claims is trivial. In either case, this relationship between reflective text and portfolio artifacts provides readers with insights into the student's writing and thinking that can be used as part of the evaluation. Thinking of the relationship between reflective writing and portfolio artifacts this way moves away from students having to self-evaluate in a context that has high stakes for them (e.g., a course grade, placement into or out of a certain course, entrance into a program, etc.) when they may not have the evaluative expertise to make the decision and when they have a vested interest in the outcome. If the task instead is making descriptive claims about their writing, their learning, or/and their development, and they are required to provide textual support for those claims, students and readers alike are put in a more tenable position in which we can inquire as to the match between the claims and the evidence students produce. The decision about the students' writing is then based on this dialogic relationship between texts rather than on the students' ability to schmooze ([Weiser 1997](#)) effectively.

I also find myself influenced by [Scott \(2005\)](#) and [O'Neill \(2002\)](#), who warn of the hollowness of generic reflective cover letters. Most of the students to whom I assign portfolios these days are preparing them for the purposes of obtaining an internship, employment, or entrance into graduate school. In most of these contexts, students are rightly concerned about the role reflection might play for these external, authentic audiences, and I no longer insist that reflection is necessary for the portfolio. At the same time reflection is playing less of a role in my students' ePortfolios, it has gained importance in my teaching, becoming the most consistent and important element of my writing pedagogy. Repeatedly in class, I ask students to reflect on what they are thinking and on choices they are making as composers at different stages in the development of a project. Here, for example, is a set of reflective questions students addressed when turning in a grammar/usage tutorial video project; there's a clear pattern of beginning with descriptive (*what*) questions before moving to evaluative (*why*) questions.

1. What was your topic? How did you choose it? How did you narrow or expand your focus to fit the assignment constraints?
2. What did you (have to) learn or review about the topic? How nuanced or challenging are the rules? Where did you go to verify the accuracy of your work?
3. What creative element(s) did you include to try to make the topic interesting or memorable? How effective do you think you were on this point?
4. What technology platform did you use? What did it allow you to do that you liked? What couldn't you do that you might have wanted to? To what extent was it the best choice for you on this project?
5. How satisfied are you with the accessibility of your work? To what extent do you think the video will be fully accessible regardless of (dis)ability?

6. If you could start over with this project, what would you do differently?

While this video project was not part of a larger portfolio evaluation in the class (though many students were completing a professional portfolio alongside the class), I did have students complete these questions as part of the evaluation process for this assignment. And for them, the first five in the list all corresponded with content we addressed in class throughout the assignment, so none of these questions was disconnected from their curricular experiences. The way students answered these questions was useful to me as I evaluated their work as well as the effectiveness of the assignment, and much of what appeared in the reflection would have been invisible to me were I only viewing the final video. For example, one student decided to develop her video on subjunctive moods (something I could tell through the video), but what I wouldn't have known is that her original plan was to include imperative and indicative moods as well. When she included that information in her reflection with a rationale for why she selected the subjunctive over the others, it provided insight for me on one of my assessment criteria: the ability to narrow in or focus on a topic for the scope of the video. The video itself, then, served as evidence for her claims. If I had watched the video and had seen it included multiple moods, I would not have noticed the disjuncture between her claims about focus and what she completed. On the other hand, if I had only viewed the video and not read any of her reflection, I wouldn't have known to look for that focus, and I wouldn't have known if the focus were intentional, planned, or rhetorically motivated. In the end I needed to read her reflection *and* view the video with the claims from the reflection in mind.

Examples like this come up each time I read a reflection in conjunction with a project or a portfolio. Students in my writing courses often compose portfolios with professional interests beyond the academy in mind. I prompt them during the semester to write

reflections on their perceived audiences and how they might tailor the content of the portfolio to the audiences' needs and interests. In the final reflections that accompany the portfolio—most often these reflections are not included in the portfolio because I am the ultimate audience for the reflection but not the portfolio—they consider their regular reflections and write a meta-reflection that situates their work and explains how the decisions they made in the collection and selection speak to their understanding of audience(s). I may not always agree with students' choices or interpretations of evoked audiences, but the reflection gives me a sense of how they are or aren't thinking rhetorically, and it gives us a starting place for dialogue. It also keeps me as a teacher from making blanket assumptions about individuals or groups of students that I might make otherwise. For example, I remember a student a few semesters ago who had developed as an editor, but in her professional portfolio, she organized her work around creative-writing genres used in our department to organize its curriculum. My initial reaction to this organization was that it was all wrong: she was looking back at her coursework before changing majors rather than forward to internships and other professional possibilities. In her reflection, though, she wrote about wanting to be a fiction and poetry editor, and she thought this arrangement was the best way to establish her credibility as a writer. While I didn't completely agree with her approach, I understood her rationale far more than if I had just seen the portfolio (and who knows what I would have thought if I had just seen the reflection but not the portfolio?). From this point we negotiated a reorganization around these recognized divisions, but she also decided to include subcategories in her portfolio that differentiated her original work from the work she edited in each generic category. We got to this point through an exchange, in part, because her tasks included making an argument about rhetorical choices in the reflection and supporting them with artifacts in the portfolio. My job was to look at *both* reflection and artifacts to help her think through the effectiveness of her strategy. While this is only one

example, time and time again when I contact students after they finish my courses and/or our program—I stay in touch with many through LinkedIn and other professional networking platforms—students say that shaping the portfolio for a nonacademic audience was the key to their transition from school to their careers.

It also might be worth noting in closing that few if any of the reflective questions I have students complete during the semester ask for direct or overt self-evaluation. Rather, the prompts tend toward asking them to articulate decisions they made while writing and assume they can provide a rhetorical rationale for their choices. Questions about the effectiveness of a decision or the strengths and weaknesses of textual features move toward self-assessment, but they aren't the primary focus and self-evaluation follows their descriptions. This purposeful effort to move reflection away from self-evaluation and toward description of rhetorical decision making, not unlike [Jody Shipka's \(2011\)](#) design of reflection, is one of the most important shifts in my thinking about reflection in my teaching with reflection and portfolios over the past two decades. This descriptive reflection accomplishes at least two purposes: (1) it reminds students consistently throughout our time together that they should have rhetorical reasons for the decisions they are making about their texts, and (2) it provides a running record, a commentary students can access later and consider as they attempt to make meaning of their development as writers. I've been collecting and analyzing these informal reflections from students for years, and I'm amazed at how many writers in my classes still have a hard time articulating rhetorical rationales for their decisions, even though such articulation is the primary focus of the class. Their rationale too often remains authorcentric, citing their own likes, dislikes, preferences, and so on instead of looking outward toward authentic audiences and purposes. However, in noticing this inward focus through the reflective writing in relation to the other texts students produce, I have a platform to engage them in more outward thinking—as well as one for my evaluation of their work. Until students

make and can articulate rhetorical choices, I am not confident that I'm doing my job well, even with the writers who otherwise produce relatively high-quality texts and portfolios. The only way I can gain insight into this way of thinking is through comparing their reflections and their compositions. Each plays a vital role in the relationship, which is why I don't believe that either can be discounted or elevated above the other.

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