

# Capturing Student Progress via Portfolios in the Music Classroom

*Student portfolios can help make your music classroom goals clearer and more achievable, and they document what each child is learning.*

A common desire among music educators is to help students develop the ability to reflect on and evaluate their own music making. To achieve this goal, music educators often provide their students with a variety of instructional activities, such as watching their ensemble's latest concert performance and writing a critical review of it, allowing students to independently prepare to perform alone and in small groups, and asking students to identify and reflect upon both individual and ensemble musical goals. Such activities can lead to increased self-awareness and reflective thinking, opening the doors to meaningful musical growth.

As a middle school choral conductor-teacher, I required my students to participate in our school solo and ensemble festival. In my efforts to guide their preparations, I gave students the adjudication sheets at the beginning of the project and explained each musical concept in depth. I encouraged them to work on these musical elements as they practiced. While working with different groups, I noticed that the students inevitably considered little more than notes and rhythms in their preparations. There seemed to be very little reflection on expressive aspects of the piece and almost no reflection on technical aspects, such as vowels, diction, or tone. The students had not yet internalized these music concepts in a meaningful way. I asked myself how I might have better prepared my students to (1) internalize choral singing concepts and apply that knowledge to new situations, (2) struc-

ture rehearsals based on prespecified musical goals, and (3) reflect on, critique, and improve their group and/or individual rehearsal skills.

As I have reflected on this experience, I have realized that there was much more I could have done to guide students through the process and to help them take more responsibility for their learning. One teaching tool that may have been useful is the portfolio. Because portfolio contents are usually selected by the students, portfolios require students to reflect on their work, assessing the work's quality and documenting their progress. In certain kinds of portfolios, students then formalize this knowledge through written reflections that become a guideline for reviewing the portfolio's contents. The process of creating a portfolio also provides opportunities for reflection as teachers and students engage in contextually rich dialogue.

Portfolios can serve as an alternative or authentic form of assessment. Authentic assessment is "used to determine student progress while the student is involved in real-world activities where learned knowledge can be applied."<sup>1</sup> In contrast to more traditional forms of testing, portfolios allow students to apply their knowledge in real-world activities, such as those described in the paragraphs above. When students create portfolios, both the process and product are captured, allowing both students and teachers to better understand depth of student understanding and achievement.

## Types of Portfolios

When students perform at contests or festivals, the ensembles receive ratings or comments based on their performance at a particular moment. Essentially, the students' "best work" is on display. This snapshot view of student achievement is a *summative* assessment. In contrast, *formative* assessment takes place in the classroom on a daily basis. Formative assessment is a day-to-day monitoring and assessing of student learning. Formative assessment occurs when the teacher listens to the ensemble and identifies focus areas for improvement. Students also participate in formative assessments as they reflect on and critique their own work.

Portfolios are usually summative (highlighting specific student achievements), formative (documenting students' learning over time), or a combination of the two.<sup>2</sup> Portfolios can be used with individuals or classes/ensembles. In the classroom setting, individual portfolios are often used more than group/ensemble portfolios, although each type of portfolio can provide different and valuable information about student learning.

In 1967, philosopher Nelson Goodman founded Project Zero at Harvard University.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this program was to investigate and enhance arts education. As part of Project Zero, the Arts Propel program was designed to help students in producing, understanding, and reflecting on works of art. Assessment involved a formative portfolio, or "processfolio,"<sup>4</sup> that captured student progress on creative projects. Other formative portfolios that demonstrate student improvement or learning in a specific task over time are known as *learning portfolios*,<sup>5</sup> *growth portfolios*,<sup>6</sup> or *working portfolios*.<sup>7</sup> I refer to all formative portfolios as "learning portfolios" from this point forward to reinforce the idea that these portfolios document student learning.

In a learning portfolio, a student might include an audio recording of three individual sight-singing tests from the beginning, middle, and end of a semester to show increasing confidence or skill mastery. The student could also include a written statement describing the learning illustrated in each artifact. The strength of a learning portfolio is that it encourages students to reflect on and assess the quality of their individual work. It reinforces the choral curriculum by requiring that students assess and document their progress. It also allows students to see progress over time, whether over one semester or multiple years.

In contrast, a summative portfolio highlights the students' finest work or achievement. Types of summative portfolios include "*best-works portfolios*,"<sup>8</sup> "*product portfolios*,"<sup>9</sup> "*presentation/product portfolios*,"<sup>10</sup> or "*passportfolios*."<sup>11</sup> I refer to all summative portfolios as best-works portfolios from this point forward to reinforce the idea that these portfolios highlight student achievement. A best-works portfolio also contains representative works from a variety of categories, but unlike a learning portfolio, it does not attempt to show progress over time. A best-works portfolio could include a score and recording of a student composition, an especially meaningful and well-written concert reflection paper, a theory test on which the student did particularly well, and a recording of the student's small ensemble performing at district solo and ensemble/festival. As with a learning portfolio, a best-works portfolio requires that students reflect on the learning and achievement represented in their works. Students review their work to determine which artifacts demonstrate growth in specific learning outcomes or represent their finest level of achievement. The passportfolio is a summative portfolio used to demonstrate student readiness to progress to the next level or class. It shows student achievement and/or specific learning outcomes.

Another kind of portfolio is prepared by the teacher and evaluates the ensemble rather than individuals. Ross Miller describes two types of portfolios for evaluating ensemble learning and/or achievement.<sup>12</sup> A *product/performance portfolio* is a formative portfolio created by the teacher, containing a collection of similar materials from the class (i.e., the same assignment from all students). This portfolio is used for "ranking and sorting" of student achievement for measurement purposes. It is helpful for identifying the range of student achievement in a class. A *program portfolio* is a summative portfolio containing the representative best works of a group or ensemble. Because the program portfolio highlights the accomplishments of a program, it can be used to promote the program to parents or administrators or to recruit participants.

## Five "Key Steps"

In their book *Measurement and Assessment in Teaching*,<sup>13</sup> Robert Linn and David Miller present five "key steps" for creating and using portfolios: (1) specify purpose, (2) provide guidelines for selecting portfolio entries, (3) define student role in selection and self-evaluation, (4) specify evaluation criteria, and (5) use portfolios in instruction and communication. I will discuss each of these steps in detail, sharing essential principles and suggestions for implementation. As each key step is described, I will relate it to a sample portfolio intended for a small-group or individual performance project. Although the sample portfolio is designed for use with choir students, it can easily be altered for use with other types of ensembles or classes (e.g., band, orchestra, group keyboard, songwriting classes, guitar classes). This sample portfolio is designed to be used with high school students. For use with younger students, a teacher would need to simplify the language of the guidelines and consider requiring fewer artifacts. A teacher would

also need to carefully and thoroughly explain each element of the portfolio in depth, should provide examples of excellent and poor work, and should provide a more detailed description of the work. Also included in the sample portfolio is a suggested timetable for completion of each required element.

## Specify Purpose

A successful portfolio begins with a clear vision of the purpose of the portfolio. Initial dimensions to consider are (1) the specific curricular goal or goals to be addressed in the project, (2) whether the portfolio will be a learning or a best-works portfolio, and (3) who will view the portfolio and for what purposes. These elements should be made explicit in verbal and written instructions. Other purposes in addition to student learning should also be made explicit. For example, the portfolio could be used as a springboard for discussion between teacher and students. It also could be used to provide students with valuable feedback, to assist the teacher in molding instruction to better meet student needs, and to demonstrate student learning and achievement at conferences with parents, students, and administrators.

The teacher should decide first which curricular goals might best be reinforced through a portfolio. One option is for the portfolio to have several sections, each emphasizing a different curricular goal. For example, the portfolio could be used to address sight-singing, music listening, and composition/improvisation assignments. In contrast, the portfolio could be focused on only one aspect of the curriculum, such as a small-group performance project (see Figure 1). The portfolio does not need to address every aspect of the curriculum. Rather, the teacher should select one or several specific curricular goals to be addressed.

An additional but relatively unexplored aspect of portfolios is their use in promoting students' affective learning as well as technical learning. Music educators might consider the types of affective learning that occur in their ensembles or

classes and create specific learning objectives based on these reflections. These learning objectives might then be incorporated into the portfolio in tandem with other technical learning objectives.

## Provide Guidelines for Portfolio Contents

In connection with the clearly stated purpose, written guidelines should provide a description of work to be included in the portfolio. This description should detail a list of items to be included (making certain to designate optional and required items) and the number of entries (minimum and maximum). General ideas for portfolio contents may include, but are not limited to, listening logs, journals, assignments, tests (i.e., sight-singing, music history, or music theory), compositions (including drafts), individual and/or ensemble goals, adjudication sheets, digital or audio recordings of rehearsals or performances, teacher comments, and students' written reflections on their work (i.e., concerts, small-group singing projects, composition projects, or individual musical growth). Advances in technology now easily allow students to include digital recordings or create their own Web-based portfolios.<sup>14</sup>

## Define Student Role in Selection and Self-Evaluation

Evaluating one's own work is a valuable learning experience. As students consider the content and quality of each artifact, their awareness of their strengths and weaknesses may become more apparent. This awareness might encourage students to focus on areas for improvement, provide a sense of accomplishment in achievements, and help students develop more ownership of their learning. Portfolio instructions should clearly state who will select the contents. Evaluation can occur individually, or in collaboration with a teacher, peers, or parents.

For a best-works portfolio, it may be appropriate for the student to consult with the teacher or peers to determine the "best" work in a particular category.

In contrast, for a learning portfolio, the teacher may want students to individually reflect on the quality of their work—journal entries, for example—and determine the learning that each artifact represents.

## Use Portfolios in Instruction and Communication

Students often pay more attention to instruction that is essential to their completing a required assignment. Music educators who want their students to internalize specific musical concepts can increase student accountability for each concept through using portfolios. In the sample portfolio (see Figure 1), the contents of the portfolio reflect classroom instruction; students are required to include a "Musical Goals" worksheet as well as a written reflection on the process of writing musical goals. These assignments reinforce instruction in a variety of musical skills: basic score analysis, musical imagination/creativity/interpretation, use of music terminology, and other skills. The writing reflection encourages students to contemplate the degree to which they accomplished the task and to identify areas for improvement.

Specific course goals, such as listening to and describing music, creating compositions, and performing with proper posture and technique, can be measured through individual or class activities/assignments. For example, after teaching principles of healthy vocal technique, students could be required to demonstrate these skills individually, and their performances could be recorded and rated by the teacher. The rating sheet and recorded performance might then later be selected by the student as demonstrating achievement of those course objectives.

In addition to improving classroom instruction, portfolios are a useful tool for sharing student progress with parents and administrators. Portfolios increase the richness of dialogue between parents and students, provide concrete evidence of learning, and illuminate the goals of the choral classroom. With portfolios, parent-student-teacher conversations can focus more on the objectives of the choral

## FIGURE 1

### Small-group or Individual Performance Portfolio

#### Purpose:

As a result of this portfolio project, students will be able to

1. internalize ensemble choral singing concepts and apply that knowledge to small-group or individual performance,
2. structure rehearsals based on pre-specified musical goals, and
3. reflect on, critique, and improve their group and/or individual rehearsal skills.

This learning portfolio will document student learning over the course of this project and will provide opportunities for written reflection on that learning. The portfolio will be used as a source of discussion between teacher and students, will provide students with valuable feedback, will assist the teacher in adjusting instruction, and will be shared at conferences with parents and students to demonstrate student learning and achievement.

Item	Contents	Due Date
1	Your "Musical Goals" worksheet, outlining at least three specific goals for your piece, for each dimension (i.e., tone color, expression, diction and syllabic stress, balance, blend, energy).	Week 2
2	Your group's "Musical Goals" worksheet (compares your individual "Musical Goals" worksheets and establishes common musical goals). All groups and individuals should schedule a time to review their goals with the teacher.	Week 3
3	REFLECTION #1: Write a short statement reflecting on your experience writing musical goals. What was easy, difficult, surprising, frustrating, energizing, and/or interesting about this experience? What would have made the experience more meaningful? Did you find it helpful? (No more than one page)	Week 4
4	Three weekly progress reports from the project that demonstrate achievement of any of the three purposes stated at the top of this page.	Week 7
5	REFLECTION #2: A one-page statement describing the achievement your three progress reports demonstrate.	Week 7
	(PERFORMANCE)	(Week 8)
6	A digital recording of the live performance and the adjudication sheet(s).	Week 9
7	REFLECTION #3: Listen to the recording of your performance. Discuss the comments from your teacher/adjudicator. With which comments did you agree? With which did you not agree, and why? (No more than one page)	Week 9
8	REFLECTION #4: In a one-page paper, discuss what went well with this portfolio process, what did not go well, and what you would do differently next time.	Week 10
	TURN IN PORTFOLIO	Week 10

#### Selecting Contents:

All contents listed above are required. Most will be completed outside of class, although you will be given time in class to collaborate on your group's "Musical Goals" worksheet. You should select the three weekly progress reports without assistance from others. You may discuss/brainstorm with your group for item number 7, although each individual should write his or her own reflection statement.

#### Grading:

- 30% "Portfolio Self-Evaluation Form" (you will fill this out)
- 70% Teacher Evaluation (using the attached evaluation rubrics) (See Figure 2.)

classroom and on how well the student is meeting those objectives.

Some parents may not completely understand the kind of work that students do in choir. Portfolios help parents see and hear their child's musical achievement. Ideally, parents and students attend the meeting together, and the student shares the portfolio with the parents. As parents see specific progress in specific musical goals, they may develop increased knowledge, appreciation, and support for the goals of music education and for their child's continued participation in the program.

## Grading

Portfolio guidelines should state clearly how the portfolios will be assessed and/or graded and by whom. Portfolios are evaluated differently depending on the purpose of the portfolio. There are essentially two main purposes for portfolios: to assess students (assign grades) and to reinforce/enhance classroom instruction.<sup>15</sup> Both purposes can be present, but one purpose usually takes precedence.

In portfolios created for the purpose of reinforcing/enhancing classroom instruction—learning portfolios—the teacher and student review and discuss the portfolio contents throughout the semester. This allows the teacher to identify individual students' strengths and weaknesses, and helps the teacher identify areas for further instruction. Some of the contents of a learning portfolio might be evaluated independently of the portfolio, but later, included in it. For example, in the sample portfolio (see Figure 1), students are asked to include their individual and group "Musical Goals" worksheets. These worksheets could be collected and graded when they were completed at the beginning of the semester. The worksheets are included in the finished portfolio, but are not evaluated a second time. What *is* evaluated is the written reflection that accompanies the worksheets. The written reflection could be evaluated using a specific rubric that was given to students at the beginning of the project. In this way, students' ability to reflect on and write about their learning is the primary focus of the assessment.

## FIGURE 2

### Evaluation Rubric for Portfolio Project

#### CONTENT COMPLETION:

Individual "Musical Goals" worksheet	/2
Group "Musical Goals" worksheet	/2
Reflection #1 (on writing musical goals)	/2
Three weekly progress reports	/2
Reflection #2 (describing the achievement in the three progress reports)	/2
A digital recording of the live performance	/2
Adjudication sheet(s)	/2
Reflection #3 (on the performance/adjudicator comments)	/2
Reflection #4 (on the overall project)	/2
Portfolio turned in on time	/7
TOTAL	/25

#### CONTENT QUALITY:

(Circle the category/points that best reflect the quality of the work)

Contents illustrate consistently exceptional depth of reflective thinking and consistently accurate assessments of individual knowledge, skills, and/or work.	75
Contents illustrate consistent reflective thinking and mostly accurate assessments of individual knowledge, skills, and/or work.	60
Contents illustrate sporadic reflective thinking and assessments of individual knowledge, skills, and/or work that are sometimes limited, weak, or inaccurate.	45
Contents illustrate little reflective thinking and often inaccurate assessments of individual knowledge, skills, and/or work.	30
Contents illustrate no reflective thinking and consistently inaccurate assessments of individual knowledge, skills, and/or work.	15
TOTAL	/75

CONTENT COMPLETION \_\_\_\_\_ / 25

CONTENT QUALITY \_\_\_\_\_ / 75

CUMULATIVE SCORE \_\_\_\_\_ / 100



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Best-works portfolios are usually connected to summative rather than formative evaluation. For this reason, they do not lend themselves as easily to improving everyday instruction as do learning portfolios. Best-works portfolios also present a different evaluation challenge than do learning portfolios. Ideally, portfolios can be compared to each other and the

content/quality can be reliably evaluated. But if students have the option of creating portfolios that vary greatly in content from student to student, as in the case in a best-works portfolio, it becomes much more difficult to objectively evaluate the contents. In fact, overall reliability for portfolio grading is generally quite low.<sup>16</sup> Although objective grading of portfolios

is often problematic, teachers should consider the possibility that portfolio creation is still one of the most valid ways of determining student learning. With well-constructed grading rubrics, the reliability of portfolio grading can improve significantly.<sup>17</sup>

## **Making Portfolios Work**

Portfolios require careful thought and preparation, on the part of both the teacher and the student. A portfolio project will be most useful if the teacher plans well in advance how to connect the portfolio to curricular goals, provides clear guidelines, and provides feedback for students while the students are creating and selecting portfolio materials. These efforts require a sincere investment of time and energy. The investment in designing the project, assisting students, and grading is perhaps one of the most significant hindrances to using portfolios and should be carefully considered before attempting the project. Initial implementation of portfolio assessment can be made simpler by introducing it into one class at a time. Portfolios can then be introduced into other classes as the teacher becomes more comfortable and efficient using this assessment tool.

The design, implementation, and evaluation of portfolios can be made more efficient over time in three ways:

- The first attempt at designing a portfolio will obviously be the most time-consuming, but if the project is used again at a later date, much of the original design work already will be finished. A teacher will need only to revise and improve upon the original design.
- After an initial attempt at using portfolios, the teacher will know what additional classroom instruction is required to better assist students in preparing their portfolios. The teacher also will have a clearer picture of how the project flows with the curriculum, and can plan more efficient ways to include portfolio work during class time.

- Evaluation of portfolios, although much more time-consuming than grading standardized tests, can be made more efficient through the use of carefully constructed evaluation rubrics.<sup>18</sup> A sample evaluation rubric is included (see Figure 2).

On the positive side, the portfolio project engages students in a way that can be extraordinarily meaningful. It allows students to capture and highlight their unique learning and accomplishments. It assures opportunities for introspection by requiring students to think more deeply about their own learning and music making, providing insights that may not be discovered in any other way. From a curricular standpoint, the portfolio is valuable because it makes the goals of the choral classroom clear and achievable. Although portfolios are time-consuming to develop and assess, they offer significant benefits for students and are therefore worth the investment of time and effort.

## NOTES

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