

Portfolio Assessment: Virtues, Vices, and Examples

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This post is by Justin Wells, Executive Director of Envision Learning Partners.

Portfolio assessment has been around for a long time, and the practice appears to be growing. It's easy to see why. A portfolio lends itself naturally to assessment, the aim of which is to collect evidence to answer a question about learning or performance. The fundamental concept of a portfolio, adopted from the world of the arts, is to make claims about one's skills through curated evidence of one's work. **Claim:** I am a skilled photographer of family portraits. **Evidence:** Look at this portfolio of portraits I have taken.

When it comes to assessment, the portfolio concept has **two chief virtues**:

- A portfolio is an impressively **flexible form of assessment** because it can wrap itself around just about any claim or set of claims, no matter how complex. That's not to say that it's easy to defend those claims, but a portfolio can open the door to evaluating certain skills that are closed to other forms of assessment. This is especially useful to the growing number of schools and districts that are publicly committing to teaching deeper learning skills, often in the form of a graduate profile. It's hard to design a test of creativity or collaboration. But it's not hard to imagine a student assembling evidence of her creativity or collaborative abilities into a portfolio.
- A portfolio **actively enrolls the student in the assessment** in ways that other forms of assessment cannot. Because a portfolio represents a subset of a body of work, it requires choices. The photographer doesn't show you all the photographs he's ever taken; he presents a curation of his photographs. And every one of those choices is an opportunity for making meaning, deepening understanding, and practicing persuasion.

The **flip side of each of these virtues is a vice**, or bad habit, of portfolio design:

- A portfolio's validity breaks apart when its **claims are not crystal clear** to all involved. I have witnessed situations where some portfolio reviewers were looking for evidence of proficiency and others for evidence of growth. When the portfolio's purpose is not sharply defined and collectively understood, the whole endeavor can feel like an unrigorous waste of time. The portfolio idea unnecessarily takes the blame. Similarly, teachers need to **calibrate** their understanding and use of assessment tools, so that students are being evaluated with consistency.
- A portfolio is hardly a portfolio if **the student is not able to make choices** about what goes into it. This happens when the portfolio's parameters are so prescribed there's no room for choice, or the student hasn't had enough opportunities to practice the skill. To get the cognitive benefits of curation, students must have a range of work from which to choose. As a teacher, I appreciated this collateral virtue of portfolio assessment: it pushed me to provide my students with more opportunities to produce work so they could make choices down the road. Surprise, surprise--the students got better faster.

A final tip: Apply portfolios to skills that are valued but insufficiently assessed. Already institutionalized measurements such as test scores and grades are practical and they tell us a lot, but they don't tell the whole story. Take advantage of the flexibility of portfolio assessment to get at those other important but often neglected skills of deeper learning, including solving complex problems, working collaboratively, communicating effectively, and learning how to learn. Portfolios will seem superfluous--to teachers and to students alike--if they only tell us what we already know.

If you'd like to see defense in action, here are a couple options: [Yvonne's video](#) includes interviews with her teachers, as well as clips of Yvonne preparing for, delivering, and reflecting on her senior defense. [Tarshae's video](#) contains a significant portion of her entire defense. Both demonstrate the power of defense and can help educators imagine their own students learning and growing through Portfolio Defense.

Interested in learning more? Come to a [Defense Design Studio](#) this Spring and see students defend and prove they are ready for the challenges of college.