
Portfolios: An Additional or Alternative Method of Assessment in English Courses

Timothy J. Hartigan
Chulalongkorn University Language Institute

ABSTRACT

This article describes portfolios and argues that they should be considered as an additional or alternative method of assessment in Thai university English courses because of the limitations of present forms of testing and because they help produce skills that students will need in higher-level courses and in the "real world."

INTRODUCTION

Portfolios are collections of book reports, poems, essays, artwork, newspaper articles and other materials produced by students. Students keep the materials in a folder and add or delete as needed.

Portfolios have traditionally been associated with artists. For example, a painter's portfolio may include a written idea of what he or she wants to paint, charcoal sketches, and early drafts of a painting or paintings. In this way, the portfolio documents the many steps of the intellectual process that leads to the production of the final work. Photographers and writers may use portfolios in a slightly different way, that is, to showcase their best works over a period of time.

University students can use the portfolio in much the same way painters do. First, each student writes a statement of interest and collects a wide range of materials on that topic. The students then narrow their topic and produce drafts of essays which the teacher comments on and returns to the students for inclusion in their portfolios. Eventually, the students write complete, final-draft essays. And like the artist and the writer, if students continue working in this way, their portfolios will include four or five complete and original essays by the end of the term, along with all of the materials that show how they arrived at their final products.

A portfolio for an English course would begin with the selection of a topic; for example, an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) Law student might choose the broad topic of "Business Misconduct" after completing a unit in the text that deals with the same issue. The student might begin by photocopying the relevant pages from the EAP text and inserting them into a portfolio folder along with a statement saying "I would like to examine white collar crime in banking." Then, the student might collect newspaper or magazine stories (in English or Thai), interview members of his or her faculty who are specialists in business law, speak with family and friends for their opinions and anecdotes, and talk with and maybe create a questionnaire for Thai businesspeople.

After collecting these materials, students would narrow their topics. For example, a student might choose to examine the life path of a lawbreaker, how law enforcement is carried out, or which industries commit the most business misconduct. Students would then write up a report, using materials gleaned from texts, newspapers, personal interviews, and any other sources available to them. Or students could put what they've learned to practical use, e.g., by creating a Thai-English Business Misconduct dictionary for other students or by writing a letter to their appropriate government representative explaining the situation and the results of their research and making an informed recommendation on possible changes.

At the end of the semester, all of these materials could be collected in the portfolio and presented to the teacher for evaluation. Students could also present a paper or a summary of their research findings to the class.

One of the purposes of the portfolio is to document the many steps each learner takes over a period of time. Students will make mistakes in their writing at the beginning of the semester that they won't make at the end. The portfolio will thus enable the teacher to monitor students' progress over the course of the term. The teacher will also be able to suggest what to keep and what to discard, as well as recommend sources of additional information. With constructive criticism from teacher and peers, the student will develop self-analytical skills in writing and editing.

Another purpose of the portfolio is to get students reading the things they want to read (or should be reading, such as English language newspapers), watching the things they want to watch, and relating this input to what they are doing in class. Last semester, after studying a unit on sexual harassment, one of my EAP Law students went to see "Ajaan Ka," a play dealing with this topic, and later discussed it with me informally.

This is precisely the kind of experience that can be easily incorporated into a portfolio in the form of a report, a journal entry, or even a cartoon. Other examples of materials that might be included in a portfolio are a brief summary of a CNN report on euthanasia in Belgium or a copy of a review of a pertinent movie or book from *The Nation*.

Portfolios can also help develop skills that are used in the "real world." Lawyers often have to translate documents, skim newspapers, and write reviews or summaries. Although these skills are currently taught in the EAP Law course at Chulalongkorn University, they are introduced in a separate unit at the beginning of the semester and divorced from any context that is meaningful to the students.

There are many reasons why portfolios have proven an effective tool for teaching and a popular way of involving students in their learning. They are concerned with the *process* of learning as well as the *product*, they can be conducted in a number of media, and they are meaningful to several of the assessment audiences: students, parents, teachers, places of further study and potential employers.

Students and parents can find out the level of competency of a student in a subject and individual strengths and weaknesses. They are concerned with their child and how the place of instruction attends to the child's needs. Portfolios will show how the student uses the resources available to him or her, and to what level the student is mastering academic criteria set by the teacher, curriculum designers, and administrators.

Teachers do not want to be relegated to the position of "classroom managers," that is, using the same texts year after year and merely break-

ing down a syllabus that may have been written years ago by an administrator not actually teaching the course, into bite-sized chunks for the students. They are concerned with students as individuals and as a group. Portfolios can allow teachers more flexibility in classroom instruction and testing.

Potential employers and places of further study want to know about the student as an individual. They need information on scholastic achievement, extra-curricular activities and personality to judge how successful the student will be in that job or university. Portfolios may allow them to see how quickly the student learns from his or her mistakes, how creatively the student uses resources, and how the student compensates for any weaknesses. Also, it can show what the student can produce when asked for a concentrated effort on a topic of interest. Any law school would be impressed by a first-hand report such as the one on child labor abuse mentioned below. Lastly, some parts of portfolio projects, like interviews, would be a better reflection of students'

communicative ability than their completion of a dialogue on an exam.

PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

Our definition of "assessment" is crucial because it shows where we place the student in the "educational cosmology." Some argue that the only criterion for selecting and using any assessment is how the detailed feedback from the assessment helps the students to grow as learners. Portfolios are an excellent tool for doing this. However, others view the student as an object to be quantified and look at assessment as the process of labelling the student with the correct number, designation, or grouping. Standardized testing is an example of an assessment tool that allows for quick and accurate labelling of a student.

Many educators believe that portfolio assessment has much more to offer teachers, parents, administrators, and especially students, than standardized testing. Consider the following chart from De Fina (1992: 39) comparing portfolio assessment to standardized testing:

Figure 1 Portfolio Assessment vs. Standardized Testing

Portfolio Assessment	Standardized Testing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • occurs in the student's natural environment • provides an opportunity for the student to demonstrate her/his strengths as well as weaknesses • gives hands-on information to the teacher on the spot • allows the student, parents, teacher and administrators to evaluate the student's strengths and weaknesses • is ongoing, providing multiple opportunities for observation and assessment • assesses realistic and meaningful daily literacy tasks • invites the [student] to be reflective (meta-cognitive) about his/her work and knowledge • invites the parent to be reflective of the student's work and knowledge • encourages teacher-student conferencing • informs instruction and curriculum, places the student at the center of the educational process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is an unnatural event • provides a summary of a student's failures on certain tasks • provides little diagnostic information • provides ranking information • is a one-time "snapshot" of a student's abilities on a particular task • assesses artificial tasks, which may not be meaningful to the student • asks the student to provide a singular desired response • provides parent with essentially meaningless and often frightening numerical data • forces teacher-administration conferences • reinforces the idea that the curriculum is the center of the educational process

Although portfolios can help assess students in ways that standardized tests cannot, standardized tests remain popular because of their ease of administration and general reliability in scoring. At the Culalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI), 80% of a student's grade in most classes is based on two two-hour discrete-item (multiple choice or true/false) and short-answer or paragraph-writing exams.

However, my impression is that a growing number of instructors in Thailand are beginning to question the practice of according so much weight to this type of testing. First, they say that the pressure to "do well" on mid-term and final exams forces a test-driven curriculum on teachers, administrators and students. Students ask "Is this going to be on the exam?" If it is not, some students are less interested in what's being discussed.

Some teachers also feel that anyone outside their classroom, even outside experts, should not be involved in assessing their students because they are not with them in class and don't see them as active learners. A mid-term exam assigns students a number but doesn't register their motivation, communicative ability, how they work with others, etc.

Tierney (p. 62) sees portfolios as "a means for dynamic and ongoing assessment" and lists four reasons for this:

1. Portfolios empower students

Students often sense a separation between course materials and what they need to know to be effective in their chosen careers. For example, parts of the EAP Law text at CULI are over ten years old and it doesn't tell the students everything they want to know now. My students have told me they are curious about such varied topics as computers and the law, present labor abuses in Thailand, Thai jails and courts, and what it is like working in an international law firm. By using portfolios, students are "empowered"; that is, they can go out and get the information that they need to help them succeed as law students now and as lawyers in the future.

2. They tell more about the students' growth, achievement, interests and needs.

Some researchers feel that present assessment, or the "test-and-file" method, doesn't adequately help students identify their academic strengths and weaknesses. Portfolios can give the teacher physical evidence of how the student has grown academically, what his or her interests are, and what she or he needs to do to become a successful learner.

3. They have a connection to what students are learning and teachers are teaching.

Many teachers today want to work with their students as people and allow them to initiate learning. Portfolios allow teachers and students to strike out in new directions, thereby discovering new materials and improving the curriculum.

4. They fit in well with regular classroom activities.

Parts of portfolios can be adapted so that they add highlights to the teachers' lectures, discussions, and other classroom activities.

The following anecdote from my EAP Law course at CULI suggests how portfolio assessment might be used to foster self-initiated learning that satisfies the four criteria just mentioned. After studying a unit on child labor abuse, my students really became interested in this topic. They began asking me questions that I couldn't answer, such as "What should I do if I see child labor abuse going on in Thailand?" I asked them about what "real-life" background knowledge they had about this problem. They admitted that they knew child labor abuses are committed in Thailand, but they didn't know anyone who was a victim or who broke the laws. One student mentioned that he passed through Hualompong Railway Station every day and that there was an emergency shelter for women and children located there. So, five students and I made an appointment to visit the train station in a few days.

Our trip was fruitful. I was especially proud of C. His marks on the mid-term exam were below average and he doesn't like speaking up in class (partly, I think, due his aggressive classmates who like to answer quickly and move on). But during the interviews (which were in Thai) he displayed a zeal that I couldn't see in the classroom and that is not measured on any test. He asked

thoughtful and detailed questions. At the end of the semester, he submitted a two-page report, along with English vocabulary and definitions and a summary of the child labor abuse problem, about our trip. Here's the report:

August 7, 1995

My teacher, Mr. Tim, my friends and I went to interview the police at Hua Lam Pong train station. When we arrived there, we interviewed a policeman named Adul Nussa about the problems at Hua Lam Pong. He told us that the problems about homeless children and immigrant laborers were often seen. These laborers are sometimes taken advantage of by illegal job-brokers. He also told us that on this day he sent 2 children, who fled from their home to stay at Hua Lam Pong, to the Emergency House. The Emergency House has an information counter at Hua Lam Pong, so policeman Adul advised us to go there to interview the Emergency House official.

When we went to the Emergency House counter, we had a chance to talk with Kethsirin Pongpadit, an Emergency House official. We asked her about her work. She answered that her duty is to help women and children who have had a problem. Most of their problems are about unwanted pregnancies, unfair salaries and separated families.

We asked her about the 2 children whom the police sent to her. She told us that these 2 children come from a family whose father and mother weren't together. Their father had a new wife and their mother had a new husband. They stayed with their father. They were struck by their step-mother, so they fled from home to meet their mother at Nakorn Sritamarat, but they had not enough money for the fare. Emergency House officials asked the police to bring the 2 children to meet their father at Bang-kaen.

And when Ms. Kethsirin knew that we are interested in child labor abuse, she recommended us to talk with the officials at the Child Labor safehouse near Hua Lam Pong. We went there and met with Boonsook Thammakit, a volunteer at the Child Labor safehouse and a girl, Manee Haddsaikao, the child laborer who was abused. The girl's face still bore witness to her abusings. Boonsook told us that the Child Labour safehouse was informed by the owner of a pharmacy shop opposite the noodle restaurant where the girl worked. The girl was abused and injured, so she went to buy medicine at his

shop. When he knew that she was injured by her employer, he called the Child Labor safehouse to ask them to help her.

The Child Labor safehouse took her away from her cruel employer and asked for the salary that was due her and compensation. After we talked with Boonsook, we went back to C.U.

I turned the first five minutes of our next class over to C., who made a brief presentation to his classmates about what he found out on our field trip. I'm sure the field trip gave him better and more in-depth information than he had previously on child labor abuse, heightened his self-esteem, interested and engaged his classmates, and gave me a different impression of an otherwise quiet student.

Portfolio assessment doesn't mean that the teacher has to spend much more time correcting papers or drastically altering the text. One of the teacher's main responsibilities in portfolio assessment is to act as an advisor. The teacher may suggest sources of materials and help in directing and revising writing. The teacher should also periodically note the development of the student's writing and materials collection and assess accordingly.

Student portfolios can be assessed so that they yield a grade (A, B, C, D or F) or a score on a scale of 1-100. It is important that the student know the criteria that they will be assessed against and also have examples of what previous students have done and what grades they have received.

CONCLUSION

Testing changes in response to different curricular needs, advances in educational methodology and technology, and the changing demands of assessment audiences. Many teachers, students, and administrators — in Thailand as elsewhere — now seek forms of assessment that are on-going, diagnostic, multi-modal, collaborative, and inextricably tied to the instruction process. Portfolios are one kind of assessment that fits all these criteria. I look forward to seeing additional or alternative forms of assessment, such as the portfolio, take their place alongside more traditional testing instruments.

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