Continual curricular refinement in pursuit of excellence:
Inspiring motivated and self-regulated L2 writers
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The current school adopted the Process Writing programme to enhance students’ writing performance in 2005. By 2010, they were awarded the Chief Executive’s Award for Teaching Excellence for the school-based writing programme. Yet, committed to excellence in the teaching and learning of L2 writing, the school integrated a portfolio assessment in 2011 to foster intrinsically motivated and self-regulated learners. This essay discusses the planning, implementation and management of the portfolio assessment.

1. Background Information
   a. School background: The Process Writing Programme

“[Our school] is a place where everyone learns and cares for one another.” This motto identifies both students and teachers as learners, engaging both in the pursuit of excellence. It is because of this culture that the school-based writing programme has undergone continual construction and refinement. In 2005, the Process Writing programme was introduced in response to the diverse learning needs and unfavorable TSA writing marks of our students. The goal of the programme was to develop independent, motivated and well-equipped L2 writers by integrating a ‘Process-Genre Approach’ in a slower, more authentic writing environment for students. The programme offered feedback tailored to individual needs through one-on-one conferencing, and through staggered, focused content and grammar marking with each draft. One writing unit required four weeks to complete: week 1 – mind map, week 2 – first draft with a focus on content, week 3 – second draft with a focus on grammar, and week 4 – publishing and sharing. Motivation was enhanced through lessons dedicated to sharing student writing in fun, creative ways, therefore, reinforcing the purpose for writing. These efforts were recognized in 2010 by the Chief Executive’s Award for Teaching Excellence (Appendix 1). They observed how our students enjoyed writing in their second language, and that our TSA writing marks significantly surpassed the Hong Kong average.

b. Commentary from CEATE and External School Review about writing

"To improve students' writing abilities, the panel launched its school-based Process Writing (PLPW) programme at P4 in 2005, and has since extended it to P3-5. Due emphasis is placed on brainstorming for ideas and peer editing, with opportunity for students to share their work. Co-teaching is also adopted for teachers to model for students the writing process and support them through individual student conferencing. A variety of genres, mostly linked to modules in the sourcebook, are duly incorporated. Mini lessons, being an integral part of the programme, provide students timely feedback on strengths and common problems in their writing." -- Inspection Report, On Focus Inspection (English Subject), 2009

"Dedicated to developing the “child writer” by initiating and implementing Process Writing to motivate students to write, conducting teacher-student conferencing to address individual language needs, and creating opportunities for students to share and appreciate each other’s work.” - Chief Executive's Award for Teaching Excellence, 2010

c. Questions for Refinement: The Path to Portfolios

Though the programme was a success, our desire to pursue excellence inspired continual reflection and refinement to the writing curriculum. It was clear our students were motivated to write in English. Yet, a closer look at this motivation – in light of educational trends of self-regulated learning, informed us that students possessed a predominantly extrinsic motivation to write. This implied that teachers still maintained the greatest influence in student development as writers – in contrast to students taking the front seat in their learning. Teachers would ask questions that students would answer, and make grammatical corrections that students would correct, yet students
didn’t seem to possess the inspiration to become writers who answered teachers questions before they were ever asked. This led us to ask the following questions:

I. Who is responsible for learning: students or teachers?
II. Can students become responsible for learning if they monitor and become aware of their development as writers?
III. How can students chart their learning process?
IV. How do educational trends of self-regulated learners, assessment as learning and portfolio assessment tie into enhancing the responsibility of learning?

2. Aims and Objectives

The aim was to refine the Process Writing programme by incorporating a portfolio assessment to foster intrinsically motivated and self-regulated L2 writers. This would empower students with the responsibility to control and direct the trajectory of their learning as writers.

3. Theoretical Review on Self-regulated Learning & L2 Writing

a. L2 writing motivation
According to Williams and Burden (1999), languages are learned by internal and external motivational factors. External factors include the need to please parents and teachers, to have rewards and punishments, and to satisfy societal expectations and norms. This was evidenced in our students. Internal factors, on the other hand, deal with interest and curiosity, personal relevance and a strong sense of agency, mastery and personal definitions of successes and failures. Though our students were motivated, we often questioned their self-awareness as writers and desire to learn to become better writers. Motivation also served as a focal area of professional development, as our teachers had become increasingly aware of student motivation due to the Process Writing programme. Yet, the distinction between internal and external motivation remained unclear.

b. Self-regulated learning
Self-regulated learning (SRL) is closely aligned to internal motivation as it allows student autonomy and control throughout the learning process, requiring students to regulate goals, monitor progress and reflect for self-improvement (Paris & Paris, 2001). To foster curiosity and interest, SRL requires students to create their own learning trajectory with self-generated thoughts, feelings and actions (Zimmerman, 2000). To cultivate a sense of mastery in writing and the ability to personally define successes and failures, SRL cycles through four phases of recursive cognition: task perception, goal setting, enacting and adaptation (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2008). Our desire was to instill a sense of purpose for students to write. We wanted to give them the chance to develop a genuine interest in writing, and to empower them to monitor their development as writers. Though teachers were unanimous in their support of self-regulated learning in L2 writing, actualization of self-regulation remained quite lofty and unclear. Hence, SRL seemed a worthy theory to explore.

c. Use of portfolios to foster intrinsic motivation
In light of internal motivation and SRL, research showed that “[portfolios] make the learning process transparent, enabling language learners to be more aware of their process, to develop a capacity for self-assessment and reflection, and to take control of their own learning” (Yilmaz & Avcanc, 2012). Our aim was therefore to use a portfolio to create a system for goal-setting (Pintrich et al., 2000) and reflection to enhance learner awareness, passing the responsibility of learning from the teacher to the student. The portfolio would provide students with a structure to organize their learning and a platform to reflect on their development as writers. The portfolio and its components would also serve as a valuable tool for teachers as they learn to engage students in meta-cognition and reflection throughout the learning process.
4. The portfolio: Components (Appendix 2)

a. **Goals**: Students set goals on content, grammar and text type objectives with each writing unit. These objectives vary in level to cater for learner diversity. One goal is collectively set by the class which provides a clear teaching objective and informs mini-lessons. The other goal is set by students to provide them with autonomy. Setting goals engage students in the learning process, requiring them to reflect on their abilities and the demands of the task at hand.

b. **Error log**: After students complete their second drafts, they receive feedback for grammatical accuracy in the form of error symbols, indicating the type of errors they have made. These errors are tallied and documented in the error log so students become aware of error type and frequency. This enhanced awareness confronts students with their strengths and weaknesses, which aids their reflections, and enables students to set clear, tangible grammatical goals for the next writing unit. The error log thus allows students to monitor and regulate their (grammatical) learning.

c. **Peer and Teacher Rubric Assessment**: The rubric assessment exposes students to learning outcomes throughout the 4-week writing unit. This empowers students to improve their writing according to the rubric to attain maximum marks, giving them the responsibility for learning, and offering them assessment as learning. The rubrics are reinforced in the goals and are taught in teaching PowerPoints, enabling students to achieve their goals. Rubrics also vary according to text type and level.

d. **Reflection (unit)**: After each writing unit, students tick or cross boxes according to the goals set at the beginning of the unit. They then reflect in 2-3 sentences on strengths and areas for improvement. Students are encouraged to use the error log, rubric and peer/teacher comments to supplement their reflections. The purpose is to engage students in the learning process, taking on a critical lens in the quality of their work and their development as writers. They are therefore allowed to reflect in their L1 to mitigate barriers of expression.

**Reflection (mid-year/end-of-year)**: At the mid- and end-of-year, students are given time to read through the writing in their portfolios. They then reflect on all completed units according to effort, enjoyment, improvement, content, grammar and development as writers. This forces students to step back from their unit-by-unit perspective to gain a better understanding of themselves as learners. In time, students become increasingly able to regulate their learning, fostering an internal motivation to become better writers.

5. **Timeline of curriculum integration**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Process Writing</th>
<th>Portfolio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005-06</td>
<td>P4*</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-07</td>
<td>P4</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-08</td>
<td>P3, P4</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-09</td>
<td>P3, P4, P5</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-10</td>
<td>P3, P4, P5, P6</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-11</td>
<td>P3, P4, P5, P6</td>
<td>P4*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-12</td>
<td>P3, P4, P5, P6</td>
<td>P4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-13</td>
<td>P3, P4, P5, P6</td>
<td>P4, P5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-14</td>
<td>P3, P4, P5, P6</td>
<td>P4, P5, P6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Initial trial is implemented in a few classrooms (of curriculum leaders) in P4 because they are unaffected by the TSA examination.
6. Portfolio implementation: The beginning steps

a. APSM position for development of portfolio assessment
In 2011, an APSM curriculum leader position became available in the English Department. Having tried the portfolio assessment for a year and convinced of its benefits, the portfolio leader provided evidence of learning and a three-year trajectory plan for the development and integration of the portfolio assessment. The portfolio leader collaborated with the English Curriculum Officer in the following way to ensure student learning:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>APSM Portfolio Leader</th>
<th>English Curriculum Officer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Professional development</td>
<td>- Professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Curriculum trial</td>
<td>- Liaising between subject and school heads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Curriculum development and integration</td>
<td>- Dissemination of practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Curriculum evaluation</td>
<td>- Curriculum evaluation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b. Counsel from university professors
The leaders took part in an action research project in collaboration with a doctoral student and L2 writing professor from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The study focused on feedback in L2 writing and allowed the flexibility to develop a portfolio. The study was one-year long and included teacher workshops, advice in curriculum development, observations, reflections and a report (Appendix 3). This guidance provided a solid foundation for the portfolio to ensure student learning.

c. Action research (pilot programme)
The action research project was implemented in Primary 4 with two teachers during the 2011-2012 academic year. This served as the pilot programme. The purpose was to develop teaching materials, create and modify components of the portfolio, and evaluate the programme throughout the year. Both the doctoral student and professor made five videotaped observations and collected data, writing samples and interviews from students. Results showed an increase in motivation to write and an enhanced awareness of writing skills and personal development as a writer. This ensured student learning for the years to come. The leaders disseminated the effectiveness of this action research to English teachers as an informal introduction of portfolios into the curriculum.

d. Presentation of findings to Curriculum Team
At the end of the academic year, leaders presented findings from the pilot study to the Curriculum Team with regard to SRL. The leaders shared the purpose, planning and implementation of the programme. The effectiveness was illustrated by the quality of reflections from students (Appendix 4). The team provided feedback on how to enhance the quality of student learning. The positive feedback from the Curriculum Team elevated the status of portfolios among teachers.

7. Portfolio Implementation: Moving forward

Professional Development

a. Leaders as learners
In order to successfully implement this programme, it was of utmost importance that the English leaders embodied the mindset of learners: risk-taking, reflective, realistic and humble. This was demonstrated in the pilot testing and presentation of findings to the Curriculum Group prior to the portfolio’s commencement. This attitude allowed the English team to trust the leaders and approach them with constructive, professional feedback.

b. Dissemination of good practices
The original Process Writing programme incorporated co-teaching. This served as a natural platform for monitoring portfolio implementation as the English curriculum officer and portfolio leader were involved in many classes. Though setbacks are inevitable in programme
implementation, the English leaders chose to dedicate a portion of mid- and end-of-year panel meetings to disseminate good practices observed with regard to portfolio implementation. In most instances, teachers were asked to share their practices to engage them in programme development. This positive reinforcement empowered English team members and modeled expected results.

c. **Mid- and end-of-year workshops**
In order to address setbacks, workshops were held at mid- and end-of-year panel meetings (Appendix 5). The foci of these workshops were determined by the English curriculum officer and portfolio leader after observing lessons and engaging in discussions with involved teachers. Prior to these panel meetings, teachers were also encouraged to write anonymous questions regarding the programme, which were addressed by leaders in the meetings. This channeled teachers’ questions, concerns and frustrations in a positive manner and tackled resistance to the new programme.

d. **Autonomy in unit refinement**
Recognizing the diversity of English ability among students, classes and forms, teachers were given the autonomy to change and adapt teaching materials according to their learner needs. These changes were discussed in weekly form meetings and gave ownership to teachers. The portfolio leader monitored changes made, trusting in their professional judgment while ensuring the changes were aligned to the objectives of the programme.

**Realisation of portfolio usage in classrooms**

a. **Co-planning meetings: autonomy and empowering**
Teachers were required to discuss the upcoming week’s writing lesson in weekly form meetings. The rubric was discussed at the beginning of the unit to ensure teachers knew the writing objectives and skills to be explicitly taught. Teaching PowerPoints were run-through and adapted if necessary. Teachers also shared and evaluated teaching experiences after each unit. By structuring teacher discussion in a systematic way, teachers were empowered, recognizing that their input and feedback directly informed changes to the writing unit.

b. **Combine reading and writing**
To ensure student learning, the writing programme followed the reading programme in a staggered manner. Writing is seen as the output and expression of English vocabulary, grammar structures and text type features learned in reading. As a result, some reading units found in textbooks were adapted to complement writing unit objectives. For example, students were asked to write a thank you letter in primary 4. However, the thank you letter found in the textbook was not rich in “reasons” as to why the author was thankful. The textbook passage was re-written so that students could better understand how to use “reasons” in thank you letters (Appendix 6). Reading passages have now been adapted in all KS2 curriculum. This has ensured the teaching and learning of writing objectives in portfolios because teachers expect students to use what they’ve learned from their reading in their writing.

c. **Integration into the report card**
In the Spring of 2013, after two years of formal implementation, portfolio marks were incorporated into report cards. The purpose was to offer a writing mark that reflected assessment as learning: continual assessment that informs and reflects continual learning. The portfolio offered another dimension to learning from previous summative assessments. It was marked according to the rubric and carried a weighting of 50% of the writing coursework. The other 50% was measured by a mid-term writing test. In effect, the portfolio determined 10% of the overall English writing mark and 2% of the overall English language mark. Taking its place in the report card ensured that not only students, but also teachers and parents took a new focus on results. Therefore, parents were informed in a letter and workshop at the beginning of the school year. (Appendix 7) Involving stakeholders and incorporating the portfolio into the report card played a significant role in the realisation of the programme.
d. Pupil work inspection
In its third year of implementation, the portfolio had considerably matured within the writing curriculum. Hence, the English leaders decided to focus the ‘pupil work inspection’ on the portfolio programme in the 2013-2014 academic year. The objectives were twofold: 1) to observe student performance and see whether they were motivated, well-equipped and self-regulated writers; and 2) to observe teacher performance and address issues related to portfolio implementation. Criteria for the inspection were given one month prior to its commencement. This allowed teachers time to see how they would be assessed, and to speak up about questions or concerns. After the inspection, a brief workshop was given to teachers, addressing concerns and disseminating good practices. The inspection was also used as a springboard for discussion in one-on-one conferences between the English curriculum officers and English teachers. All in all, focusing on student and teacher performance within a learning community allowed the inspection to be used constructively. (Appendix 8)

e. End-of-year sample collection
At the end of each school year, two sample portfolios were taken from each class: one student of high and low English ability. The portfolios of these two students were followed and collected from P.4 to P.6. The dual purpose of the sample collection was to 1) ensure the realisation of portfolio assessment and 2) collect data to measure longitudinal effectiveness.

Smooth integration

a. APSM liaison
The portfolio leader played a pivotal role in the success of the portfolio integration. From the pilot programme to the matured portfolio, this position was crucial in liaising between university professors, senior and middle managers, and the English teachers. Success was brought by the synergy of all parties with shared goals, open communication and designated roles.

b. Leaving one teacher in the form as a leader
After the initial year of implementation in primary 4, one teacher remained in primary 4 for the next academic year. This teacher played a significant role in helping new primary 4 teachers understand the portfolio and helped refine and adapt it for the new form. The portfolio leader moved on to develop the primary 5 and 6 curriculum.

c. Systematic filing
Soft copies of all documents were systematically uploaded to the school server, allowing easy access and simple filing of materials for the next year. Hard copies were also printed and filed in English panel files for reference in future years. (Appendix 9)

d. Guidelines
To help with the use of portfolios, a number of simple PowerPoints were created for teachers to teach students how to use portfolios. These PowerPoints included how to make goals, samples of reflections, how to use the error log, and how to file the portfolio. (Appendix 10)

e. Samples for reference
Sample portfolios were collected for reference. These included completed units of work with teacher feedback and peer reflections. Teachers were able to visualize not only how to file, but also how the different components of the portfolio were interrelated and helped foster self-regulated learners. These were also used at presentations, in school-based workshops and were on display for prospective parents on Open Day. (Appendix 11)
f. Systematic and supportive: minimizing the burden
At first, the portfolio leader developed all teaching materials. This was done over three years as the leader taught each grade level. Moving forward, English teachers monitored writing units according to the textbook unit that they were in charge of. For example, if one teacher was in charge of the thank you letter unit in the primary 4 textbook, they would also be in charge of the thank you letter writing unit. Responsibilities included going through the week’s writing PowerPoint at weekly form meetings, and having worksheets photocopied. After one or two rotations, this system became ‘second-nature’ and the burden was minimized and equally distributed among teachers.

g. Top-down and bottom-up blend
The smooth integration of the programme may also be attributed to the blend of top-down policy from school leaders and bottom-up feedback from the teachers. Policies were set in place to advance the implementation of portfolios, while teacher input molded the programme to accommodate the needs of the students, making it a successful school-based programme within a learning community (Lee & Wong, 2013).

8. Effectiveness
a. TSA & Pre-S1
As students became increasingly aware and self-regulated in their portfolios, an intrinsic motivation became evident. This was demonstrated in significantly improved P6 TSA and Pre-S1 writing results, with particular regard to those achieving the highest marks in content/grammar, as well as those attaining minimal marks who had once left writing papers blank.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>P6 TSA blank</th>
<th>P6 TSA full marks</th>
<th>PS1 high banding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005 (traditional writing)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009 (process writing)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 (portfolio assessment)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b. Samples of longitudinal improvement
Samples of high and low ability student writing were compared to samples of previous high and low ability students who had not undergone the portfolio programme. Results were similar in the initial years (Primary 4) where students continued to produce writing with largely contrasted abilities. However, at the end of primary 6, lower ability students who had experienced the portfolio showed more consistent usage of simple adjectives, talking sentences and adverbs. Similarly, higher ability students showed consistent usage of questions, examples and engaging beginnings/endings to set the tone and style of writing, revealing a deeper awareness of readership in writing and an intrinsic were motivated to write well and were able to articulate and critique why their writing was good or bad. (Appendix 11)

c. Questionnaires
Questionnaires were incorporated in the mid- and end-of-year reflections, where students were required to indicate whether they thought they were becoming better writers. This question revealed how intrinsically motivated students were as aspiring L2 writers. Following data from the first group of portfolio students, over 90% confirmed throughout their upper primary education that they believed they were becoming better writers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>1 or 2 (☹)</th>
<th>3 or 4 (☺)</th>
<th>3 or 4 (☺) %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7 / 105</td>
<td>98 / 105</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7 / 122</td>
<td>115 / 122</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014 (mid-year)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5 / 111</td>
<td>106 / 111</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. Dissemination: Beyond the Walls

Throughout the development and implementation of the portfolio, the portfolio leader was invited to speak on portfolio assessment in both MA and PGDE courses at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. This occurred twice per year from 2011-2014. There was another opportunity to speak in a MA course on Curriculum Decision-Making in November 2013 with regard to portfolio implementation. Furthermore, after a lecture sharing entitled “Innovation in the Writing Classroom” held at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in July 2013, portfolio materials were exchanged with EDB representatives in the English Language Education Section of the Curriculum Development Institute. The materials assisted in their ‘Assessment as Learning’ project for secondary students. These experiences reflect our pursuit for educational excellence, as we engage with the broader Hong Kong community. (Appendix 12)

Similarly, the English curriculum officer accepted an invitation to be seconded to the EDB in 2013-2014, focusing on the development of writing programmes in other schools. As a result, a number of lesson demonstrations and material exchanges were given to other schools relating to the portfolio. This elevated the credibility of portfolio assessments and extended the learning community beyond the walls of our primary school to the broader context of Hong Kong.

10. Conclusion

In conclusion, change does not occur overnight. Yet a learning community with persevering patience, professional guidance, meticulous planning, systematic & autonomous implementation, and reflective & constructive evaluation, yielded students who were more self-regulated and intrinsically inspired to write in their second language.

11. Reflection

“The dynamic curriculum leader continually seeks to move from where we are in the present to an improved condition for our students in the future” (Wiles, 2007). Now in its fourth year of implementation, in pursuit of continual excellence, we ask ourselves the following questions for the sake of our students of the future:

I. In a school with students of such differentiated ability, how can the diverse needs be better met within the portfolio rubric, reflection and use of meta-language?
II. What is a simple way for teachers to monitor student reflections to better understand their individual learning trajectories?
III. How can reflections be effectively assessed and should these be incorporated into the writing mark as it reveals a level of self-regulated learning?

Though questions reveal areas for improvement in the programme, it is through these gaps between the known and unknown that change – and learning – can happen. After all, our school is a place where everyone learns and cares for one another, and learning never ceases.
References

Chief Executive's Award for Teaching Excellence, English Language, 2010.  

Inspection Report; On Focus Inspection (Pui Kiu Primary School), June 2009.  


*Educational Psychologist*, 36, 2.


Appendices

1. Chief Executive’s Award for Teaching Excellence Report, 2010
2. Portfolio Components
3. Material development and report from pilot study
4. PowerPoint to Curriculum Group, 2012
5. PowerPoint from mid-/end-of-year panel meeting
6. Revised passage and parallel rubric for P.4 Thank You Letter unit
7. Report card grade distribution and letter to parents
8. Pupil work inspection report and feedback
9. Screenshot of server organization
10. PowerPoints to teach portfolio usage
11. Portfolio sample
12. MA sharing PowerPoints