Using Writing Portfolios to Assess Course Learning Outcomes in a Jordanian University

Celine Kamhieh[1,*]

[1]Faculty of Languages and Communication, American University of Madaba, Amman 11821, Jordan

*Corresponding author: Faculty of Languages and Communication, American University of Madaba, P.O. Box: 2882, Amman 11821, Jordan. E-mail: ckmrap@gmail.com

Abstract

Portfolios were used to assess cognitive and affective course learning outcomes in an undergraduate writing program at a private university in Jordan. A convenience sample of twenty-one male and female Arab EFL/ESL freshmen, wrote short weekly assignments over a fifteen-week semester, made regular diary entries about their writing and leisure reading, and wrote a short children's story. These were not graded but students received prompt feedback. At semester's end, they collected their work in a portfolio and wrote a final evidence-based reflection, in which they analysed their strengths and weaknesses in writing. These portfolios were graded based on their inclusion of regularly submitted written work, evidence of their response to given feedback and their analysis of their progress in writing. Using qualitative data analysis based on the grounded theory method, students' reflections were mined for rich data, concepts were labelled and emerging categories were identified. These codes were further analysed in more depth, using cognitive and affective taxonomies, which showed that the course outcomes had been met. Recommendations are made for greater use of portfolio assessment at tertiary level in Jordan.

Keywords: writing portfolio assessment, learning outcomes, metacognition, evidence-based reflection, Jordan, EFL context

1. Introduction

For decades, college writing assessment consisted largely of standardized, objective tests and one-shot, timed essays, where the focus was on the product. These are viewed as the first two waves of writing assessment (Hamp-Lyons, 2002; Yancey, 1999). By the 1980s, teachers were increasingly questioning the validity of the product approach to writing assessment, wondering how one piece of writing, written at one sitting, could give a true picture of a student's writing abilities. It was felt that multiple samples written at different times in different genres (Elbow & Belanoff, 1986) would give a more authentic picture and, rather than replace testing, these could complement it (Zubizzareta, 2008), as a form of "qualitative companion" (Hebert, 2001, p.10). Thus, writing portfolio assessment was experimented with and quickly became the third wave of writing assessment (Hamp-Lyons, 2002; Yancey, 1999).

Portfolios originated in the fine arts as compilations of samples of work, but they are now used for assessment in a wide range of subject areas in higher education (Zubizzareta, 2008), particularly academic writing. Writing portfolios require students to collect their written work over a period of time, select their best pieces, add a table of contents, write a reflection and submit it all for evaluation, as evidence of their efforts, progress and abilities in writing (Paulson et al, 1991; Butler, 2006). They can be compiled digitally as ePortfolios or presented in paper format. Despite the growing popularity of writing portfolios in many parts of the world, their potential use as a more authentic form of writing assessment remains unexplored in some ESL/EFL settings (Lam, 2015), including parts of the Arab world, where exam-oriented cultures prevail and a product approach to writing is dominant. In one such setting, this study investigates the use of portfolios to assess learning outcomes in a first-year writing course at a private university in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, in the Middle East.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Some of the Benefits of Writing Portfolio Assessment

Writing portfolio assessment (PA) places importance on the writing process and reminds students that both the process and product of writing are "inextricably interwoven" (Özer & Tanrıseven, 2016, p.36). Building a writing portfolio usually requires students to keep all of their work, from first draft to finished product, and this makes their learning visible (Yancey, 2001, p.19). It demonstrates what they can do when given the help they need and presents a more authentic picture of their progress in writing than that given by standardized testing, for example, or one-shot essay writing (Elbow & Belanoff, 1986). As Hebert (2001) puts it, a standardized test tells which student knows more, while PA tells us what each student has learned (pp.xii-xiii). Therefore, it can provide a more accurate picture of their writing ability (Hyland, 2003, p.234). When students compare their improved work with their own earlier attempts against a given set of criteria, they develop greater agency and motivation than they would if they compared their finished work solely with that of others (Belgrad, Burke &

Fogarty, 2008). PA is assessment *for* and *as* learning, rather than assessment *of* learning that is done *to* students (Lam, 2015). Thus, students see writing as an exciting, iterative activity, at which they can improve.

Studies from around the world have shown the positive effect of PA on students' writing abilities. At the University of Michigan, for example, the introduction of PA in the Writing Practicum resulted in a larger number of students passing the exit exam than those solely assessed on the timed essay (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000). Similar results were also found in studies carried out in L2 settings. These included English Business writing undergraduates and preparatory EFL writing students in Yemen (Al-Muslimi, 2015; Assaggaf & Bamahra, 2016) and Thailand (Kalra et al, 2017); Engineering and Business undergraduates in Turkey (Özer & Tanrıseven, 2016); English teaching majors and EFL undergraduates in Iran (Al Roohani & Taheri, 2015; Shokraie & Tabrizi, 2016; Tabatabaei & Assefi, 2012); English majors at a Chinese university (Li, 2010); and undergraduates at two Japanese universities (Apple & Shimo, 2004). Most students in those studies also developed a positive attitude toward writing PA, which often outweighed the extra time and effort required (Abdelwahab, 2002; Apple & Shimo, 2004).

The benefits of PA are greatly enhanced by students' self-reflections, provided students are taught how to reflect (Butler, 2006), and are required to support their claims with reference to "labelled evidence" (Baume, 2001, p.9). Reflection involves students "reviewing previous knowledge and experiences to gain better insight into situations or actions" (Scartabello, Abate, & Slimak, p.103, 2018), and is considered essential to PA (Elbow, 1997). Through critical self-reflection, PA empowers students to develop greater agency, seek clarification, take advantage of feedback, improve the quality of their writing and begin to regulate their own learning (Mak & Wong, 2017). "Empowering students as self-regulated learners is one of the fundamental goals in education" (Mak & Wong, 2017, p.12). When students think about their learning (Reynolds & Davis, 2014) and question how they know what they know (Hebert, 2001; Zhang, 2010a), they activate and develop their metacognitive skills (Apple, & Shimo, 2004; Gencel, 2016; Lam, 2015). Metacognition, which is defined simply as, "knowing what we know and how we have come to know it" (Hebert, 2001, p.51), contributes greatly to students' development as self-regulated learners (Negretti, 2012; Nilson, 2013), because it shows that "the individual knows the structure and functioning of his own cognitive system" (Coşkun, 2018, p.38).

Teachers' own metacognition can also benefit from implementing PA (Hebert, 2001). Students' self-reflections can inform teachers' own reflections about the effectiveness of their teaching methods (Afrianto, 2017) and how they might do some things differently in future to achieve better results. Through the use of PA, teachers are presented with an opportunity to better understand how and what students have learned and how their teaching may have contributed to their success, from the students' perspective. They may "come to the same understandings that the portfolio builder has about what has been learned" (Ruskin-Mayher, 2000, p.137) or have their preconceptions challenged. Also, in situations where PA is not already implemented, teachers must justify its use both to themselves and other stakeholders by carefully evaluating its merits as a form of alternative assessment. Thus, portfolio

assessment can be a powerful means of learning for both teacher and student, if teachers are highly organized in their approach and provide clear instructions to students.

Despite self-reflection being an essential factor in being a learner (Rodgers, 2002), it is largely absent from many ESL/EFL settings. Traditional top-down approaches to teaching still prevail and students are seldom encouraged to take ownership of or reflect on their learning (Abdelwahab, 2002; Zhang, 2010a), particularly in writing. Instead, they are given the impression that there is only one correct way to write a particular essay and that any deviation from it will earn them low marks or a failing grade (Muasher, 2018). This renders students less able to function at university where they must think for themselves and "direct their own learning process" (Boekaerts, 1999, p.450). Therefore, PA may be viewed unfavourably in regions where traditional teaching styles and cultural mores are deeply entrenched and knowledge is not co-constructed but is imparted by an all-knowing teacher. China is one example (Zhang, 2009) but it can also be said of other areas, including parts of the Arab world.

PA is highly suited to the assessment of learning outcomes (LOs) (Ballweg, 2016; Olds, 1997), which are "statements of what the individual knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process." (European Commission, 2015, p.10). They address "long-term … acquisition of knowledge, skills, and abilities" (Lennon, 2014, p.2). PA is widely used in assessing learning outcomes (LOs) in various programs (Kuh & Ewell, 2010), including psychology (Keller et al, 2004), engineering (Olds, 1997), management (Drost et al., 2008) and computing (Irons, 2002). While many articles report on the use of portfolios to assess students' writing or to assess various course learning outcomes, few studies combine both: the use of portfolios to assess the learning outcomes of an undergraduate writing course.

2.2 Criticisms of Portfolio Assessment

Any form of writing assessment may be criticised for falling short of its goal of accurately assessing students' writing abilities, and PA is no exception. However, it seems clear that most problems associated with portfolio assessment can be resolved. For example, some question its validity and reliability. One solution is to have students submit multiple samples of their writing in different genres on different days - also called triangulation of data (Clark et al, 2001). It is also recommended to have multiple raters who participate in bench-marking sessions for grading purposes (Elbow & Belanoff, 1997). These and other factors also enhance trustworthiness (Mak & Wong, 2017), a key criterion from a qualitative research perspective. The question of whether or not to grade a portfolio depends largely on its purpose, but students usually expect to be rewarded for their efforts (van Tartwijk et al, 2007). For example, when Abdelwahab (2002) implemented an ungraded approach with secondary students in Saudi Arabia, they did not see the point of putting in all the extra effort involved when the portfolios were not graded. Elbow simply ranked his earlier students' writing portfolios as acceptable or unacceptable, rather than awarding a range of grades (Belanoff & Elbow, 1986). Many instructors believe that PA adds considerably to their workload but if each assignment is checked when it is submitted, the workload is evenly distributed over time

with only the reflection to correct at the end. It should not pose an "additional burden" (Ballweg, 2016, p.166). Therefore, most issues surrounding PA can be resolved if there is clarity of purpose, such as addressing certain outcomes, an organized approach and a sound pedagogical approach which puts students' needs first.

2.3 Studies of PA in Jordan

While many educators worldwide anticipate a 4th wave of writing assessment involving technology (Hamp-Lyons, 2001), the third wave has barely started in Jordan, where research on the use of PA consists of a few "isolated research initiatives by in-service teachers for graduate work" (Bataineh & Obeiah, 2016, p.36). In one example, pre-service teachers at a national Jordanian university observed an increase in their own motivation, interest, self-confidence, interpersonal skills, and ability to search for, read, organize and analyse information as a result of PA. While students' reflections were not in-depth, the researchers considered portfolios to be "a highly effective tool" (Bataineh et al, 2007, p.435) that could be successfully used in similar tertiary programs elsewhere in Jordan.

In another example, at a private (fee-paying) secondary school in the capital, Amman, a doctoral student (Al-Nethami, 2009) used both a control group of students which was taught using "traditional methods" (p.ix) and an experimental group which used PA, to investigate the benefits of using a writing portfolio with 10th grade male IGCSE ESL students. Students in the experimental group wrote several drafts, received teacher and peer feedback, included their best pieces and wrote self-reflections. Through pre- and post-tests, Al-Nethami found that both groups had progressed in writing, with the only statistically significant gains being made by the experimental group in the subset of writing strategies. In general, students had a positive attitude toward PA.

At a government-run secondary school for girls in the north-eastern region of Jordan, a quasi-experimental study with 10th grade students, researchers used Hamp-Lyons and Condon's (2000) Portfolio Assessment Model (Obeiah & Bataineh, 2016). They found that the portfolio group had a positive attitude toward PA and better - "superior" (p.43) - overall writing skills than the non-portfolio group. The authors cautioned that their findings may not be transferrable as the sample was small.

The literature review identifies a general dearth of studies of the use of writing portfolio assessment in Jordan at all levels of education. This study goes some way, therefore, toward addressing that gap, by investigating the assessment of learning outcomes in a first-year college writing course in Jordan.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Participants consisted of a convenience sample of twenty-one Arab freshmen, with a mean age of 21, whose standard in English ranged from B1 Preliminary to C1 Advanced on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. They were enrolled in a

first-year academic writing course at a private university in Jordan. The course teaches how to write focused, legible, organized, academic paragraphs, to think independently and to write creatively and critically. Its LOs were listed in the syllabus under Bloom's (1956) three domains: Three LOs in the Cognitive domain are combined into one here to aid analysis: *Students will know correct sentence and paragraph structures and expand their vocabulary*. The Affective domain LOs were: *Students will* LOa1) *enjoy and take pride in writing*; LOa2) *love and value reading*; LOa3) *value academic honesty*. The Psychomotor domain LO of improving handwriting is not included in this study.

3.2 Procedure

The instructor secured in writing students' consent to use their data anonymously for this research. Over 15 weeks of the semester, students submitted one to two paragraph-length assignments, weekly. The instructor read, wrote feedback on and returned those to students promptly but did not grade them, which could be seen as "breaking the rules" (Neal, 2016, pp.64-65). Students were encouraged to write second drafts if their first drafts had many mistakes. They also submitted weekly diary entries in which they reflected alternatively on their leisure reading and writing, and for their project, they wrote an original children's story. At the bottom of all written work, students wrote a 3-part academic honesty statement as follows: 1) I created this assignment specially for this course; 2) I did not lift any content from any source without properly citing it; 3) I fully explain any help I received from anyone. Thus, students learned the importance of honesty in all matters relating to their work, which would greatly enhance the credibility of their claims in their reflections.

Students were informed from the start, verbally and in writing, that the final exam would be replaced by portfolio assessment and what it would involve. They were given a rubric explaining what they should complete at home (contents page, list of assignment titles) and guidelines for their upcoming in-class, evidence-based reflection at the end of the semester. This gave them time to prepare their thoughts in advance and to seek clarification of anything they did not understand. They were instructed to save all their writing assignments throughout the course in a simple folder or file, which would later be called a portfolio. Those who had missed a submission deadline for the instructor to check their work could request a peer to do so, provided they reciprocated the gesture. Thus, their final assessment included "different samples written under different conditions" (Elbow & Belanoff, 1997, p.25), what Hyland (2003) refers to as "naturally occurring texts" (p.252). Instead of including only their best pieces, students referred to certain items as evidence when writing their reflections.

In week 15, students brought their portfolios to class and wrote an evidence-based reflection referring to all or parts of specific assignments to support their claims. The portfolio assessment in this study had most of the recommended elements of PA: a rubric, multiple drafts, different types of writing assignments done over a period of time, peer review, teacher feedback, reflection and selection, although selection was achieved differently. Another departure from the norm was that all grading was carried out by the instructor, rather than by multiple raters.

3.4 Data Analysis

Each student was allocated a number from 1 to 21, to ensure anonymity. Portfolios were initially checked for adherence to such guidelines as: organization and reflection (Keller et al, 2004), evidence to support claims, that all assignments were checked by instructor, and evidence that feedback was responded to. Reflections were read and reread and codes were labelled, and through constant comparative analysis, these were arranged under emerging category names (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As the categories remained ill-defined and unsaturated, codes served more as sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954) for further analysis. Anderson & Krathwohl's (2001) revised version of Bloom's Cognitive Process dimension (ranging from *remember* to *create*) and the newly added Knowledge dimension (factual, conceptual, procedural and metacognitive), were used to determine in more depth, how well each outcome had been achieved. Krathwohl (2002, p.216) illustrates how such an analysis could be carried out using a Taxonomy table (shown here for demonstration purposes, only).

Krathwohl's sample table (2002, p.216)

	The Cognitive process dimension					
	1. Remember	2. Understand	3. Apply	4. Analyze	5. Evaluate	6. Create
A. Factual	x			x		
B. Conceptual		x				
C. Procedural						x
D. Metacognitive					x	

This shows that students remember some factual knowledge and understand certain aspects of conceptual knowledge and so on. This forces the researcher to look beyond the factual and procedural knowledge inferred in the LO, *students will know how to write a sentence correctly*, to conceptual and metacognitive knowledge as part of the data analysis. It "causes one to look at blank areas and reflect on missed teaching opportunities" (Krathwohl, 2002, p.217). It

Data analysis met the following four criteria for trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), to varying degrees: *credibility*: students supported their claims by referring to specific examples in the portfolio; possible *transferability*: the findings could probably be transferred elsewhere; *dependability*: similar results could probably be found with similar students in a similar situation elsewhere, and *confirmability*: researcher bias was minimized by using a rubric consistently, while yet acknowledging that all grading of writing is subjective (Afrianto, 2017).

4. Findings

4.1 Cognitive Domain Learning Outcome

Three LOs in the Cognitive domain were condensed to: *Students will know correct sentence and paragraph structures and expand their vocabulary*.

The initial analysis revealed categories such as, metacognition, students' progress, take-aways from the course, habits, confessions, before and after, responsibility, advice to others, metaphors, and more. The second analysis findings, using Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) revised version of Bloom's (1956) cognitive process dimension (from remember to create) and the newly added knowledge dimension (factual, conceptual, procedural and metacognitive), are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Cognitive Process and Knowledge Dimensions (numbers indicate students)

	1. Remember	2. Understand	3. Apply	4. Analyze	5. Evaluate	6. Create
A. Factual	12,15,16,17	2	6,10,16		13	6; all
B. Conceptual	12,15,16,17	15, 16	6,10,16	13,18,	18	all
C. Procedural	14, 15, 17	10	14, 15			all
D. Metacognitive	7	3,15	10	9	3,6,7,9,10,15	7,9

Samples of rich data from students' reflections are presented below to exemplify Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) cognitive and knowledge dimensions. In many cases, supporting evidence was also taken from their assignments because, while all learned to create a new paragraph using factual and conceptual knowledge, few students wrote it in their reflections.

A. Factual knowledge refers to knowledge about terminology and specific details.

Students were able to identify "expository, argumentative, descriptive and narrative paragraphs" (12), and specific details about each, "The writer should use all senses in descriptive writing, as in assignments 8&9" (15). Many expanded their vocabulary, including this student who excitedly learned the name for people from his home city, "The people from Damascus are called Damascenes" (st16). They understood how topic, supporting and concluding sentences should be used, placed them in the correct place in paragraphs (10, 16), selected the most suitable ones from a list (13) and composed their own (6).

B. Conceptual knowledge includes knowledge of classifications, categories, principles, generalizations theories and models, and of how different components of knowledge can form a whole. The strategic importance of topic sentences was realized, "The greatest thing that I learnt was the topic sentence" (16), and the importance of grammar and sentence structure in overall paragraph coherence, "as you can see in assignments four and seven, the paragraphs that I write nowadays make a lot more sense … that gave me an easier time connecting different parts of the paragraph. (15)

Having students identify certain types of paragraphs in other texts also helped them see how the different components worked together to form a whole, "We had to explain why each type of paragraph was that particular type" (13). Some also learned to differentiate between personal writing and academic writing, "I kept writing in a free-writing manner. However, after the instructor clearly explained … I understood that this is an academic course, which means that free writing is appreciated but only when required" (18).

C. Procedural knowledge includes knowledge of skills and techniques for doing something, and criteria for determining when to use appropriate procedures. Students happily used what they had learned in A and B above, "I learned a lot of new words that I'm using to improve my writing" (17); "I started writing down sentences with better structure" (15).

"We have learned the topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentence. In task 9, when we were given a topic sentence to write a paragraph about, I found myself applying these standards, such as: writing a good topic sentence that exposes the reader to the topic, having three or more supporting sentences to support the topic sentence and the concluding sentence should reflect the topic sentence" (14).

EFL/ESL students' strategy of translating from their first language when writing a paragraph came in for criticism, "As a student who is studying using his second language, I learnt that it is a grave mistake to write using my mother language and then translate my writing because in this way you will hardly get the right structure of the sentence" (10).

Knowing what type of paragraph students were writing, helped them decide what criteria to use, "I couldn't tell the difference between a descriptive and an expository paragraph before taking this course. I didn't even know what different types of paragraphs were called, and quite frankly, it's very important information to have, because it helps a lot to know what type of paragraph you're writing when you're trying to structure it appropriately" (13).

D. Metacognitive knowledge includes knowledge of self, cognition in general and one's own cognition, "Cognitive strategies are invoked to *make* cognitive progress, metacognitive strategies to *monitor* it" (Flavell, 1979, p. 909). Students demonstrated their ability to evaluate their progress and identify what contributed to that progress. "I learned a lot from your feedback. Most of it was about sentence structure" (3). Having learned how to structure a paragraph, one wrote, "You can see the difference if you compare item 8 with item 11 or 12" (10). Another identified his strategy for succeeding in writing, "Sure, I will keep writing because when you write something like when I wrote the story, you feel success" (5). Ability to monitor their progress also included identifying contributing factors for their lack of progress, "I sometimes did not work hard enough on some of my assignments, which I am not proud of" (7). This student's reaction to his lack of hard work suggests a desire for a change of behaviour in future. A similar reaction and a clearer determination to change behaviour are described by another student who identified the reason for not doing well either in the exam or in class, "The exam wasn't very hard but I know I didn't study very well. Actually, I felt sad, when we practised the vocabulary in the class and a lot of students know them and I don't. In that I feel to cry. Yes, I can be like them, why not! It will take time but I will did it, I can" (9).

Students came to realize certain things about themselves as writers, from the more general, "I discovered lots of things about myself, either positive points or negative" (10) to the broader first-person plural, "We learned a lot … We became professional writers and enjoyed a lot!" (6), to the more specific,

"Something else that I discovered about myself that was that I make redundant sentences often. When I got rid of this bad habit, as you can see in assignment 7, my paragraphs

improved and became a lot more interesting and enjoyable to read" (15).

4.2 Affective Domain Learning Outcomes

Data was analysed for evidence that the following outcomes were met: LOa1: Students both enjoyed and took pride in their writing; LOa2: Students developed or consolidated a love of reading; and LOa3: Students learned to value (academic) honesty. Findings were organized under these five levels of the affective domain: receiving, responding, valuing, organization, and characterization (Krathwohl et al, 1973).

A1. Receiving includes being receptive and listening to others when they speak. All students but one demonstrated that they were receptive to all input and suggestions to try different strategies to improve their writing.

A2. Responding includes students' response to what they received, and compliance in following instructions, willingness and satisfaction or motivation. Responding to the instructor's feedback on their written assignments, for example, was essential for making progress, "My doctor gave me a group of instructions to follow. I had some mistakes with capital letters and linking words. When I wrote my next assignment, I improved my writing and became more careful" (16).

Feedback to this student caused her to change her approach, to start to read her writing, and resulted in progress, "when I wrote a paragraph about myself it was too short and honestly, I didn't read it after I finished writing it. After I received its corrections, the comment that I read on it changed me, somehow. It was the first time someone advocates my writing! When I was asked to do the second assignment, I felt that I want to write with all what I have. I started writing, until I ended up with a long paragraph with a "very well written" comment from my teacher. This made me reach cloud nine, honestly. …My progress in writing this semester is unbelievable! There's a huge transformation in everything, my handwriting, my vocab, my critical thinking and everything related to writing." (6).

Another student discovered that his texts were more interesting and enjoyable to read when he removed redundant sentences (15).

A3. Valuing refers to the importance and value students attach to their writing class and everything related to it and this is evidenced by their willingness to work hard (A2). They came to value themselves as writers, as we can see when this student wrote a children's story, "The real hard part for me at least, was making it a reality and not just an idea. And guess what, after a lot of drafts, emails, and hours at the library, I did it. It was worth the effort, because when you finally have it in your hands and you're reading it to a bunch of 3-year olds, seeing their faces light up with joy, and knowing that it's because of you, feels beyond amazing. And, I've always wanted to publish my own books. This was the first step and I loved the feeling. So, I'm sure, it's only going to motivate and inspire me to keep going" (2).

They realized the value of doing the assignments, "I do believe I improved. I noticed that as I pieced my portfolio together. As time passed, it became a lot easier to get them done faster; I understood their importance more" (1).

They also valued reading (1) and academic honesty. From the start of the course, the instructor insisted that students write a standard academic honesty statement on every written assignment they submitted, thus highlighting the importance of academic honesty. Over time, students learned to value it, "academic honesty is very important for any writing" (16), while another stated that at first, she didn't like writing the academic honesty statement, but that, "soon enough, it really became an eye-opener because after every assignment as I was writing it, I would really have to think if it was completely my work. You see, that's not something you would naturally just do" (6).

A4. Organization includes prioritizing values, consistency, and seeing the need for balance between personal freedom and responsibilities. This student conceded to the need for a vocabulary notebook, "Naively, I came into this course thinking I knew all the words in the English language so I wasn't very excited about having a little book dedicated to all the new words I learned. I'm glad now, that I had it and that I learnt new vocabulary. It shows not only in my writing assignments for this course, but also in my own writing at home" (1).

A5. Characterization or internalizing values is when a student's behaviour is consistent with their values. The student who found the academic honesty statement "an eye opener" now plans to keep writing it as a habit "*by nature*". Another has worked on himself to bring his behaviour in line with his belief about the value of reading,

"I am convinced that [being a] good writer comes from [being a] a good reader I hate reading but I figured out a way to trick myself into reading books. The way I do it is going through some questions which I can't answer on my own and start finding the answer through books, Internet, anything which answers the question, like this book, I read some of it for my kids' story and I am done with it but I am still reading it" (7).

5. Discussion

An analysis of students' reflections in their writing portfolios provided "credible evidence" (Drost et al, 2008, p.112) that PA successfully addressed the cognitive and affective course LOs. Students' progress in and positive attitude toward writing as a result of PA, are consistent with Al-Nethami's (2009) findings with 10th grade Jordanian students. Among the rich data that will inform future instruction (Olds, 1997) were some unexpected findings, such as student 13's "*I had expected to learn more from this course*". This will prompt the instructor to elicit students' expectations in future and increase their sense of agency. Others show that as students became more engaged in the process of writing, they developed a growing awareness of the reader's perspective, and the writer's responsibility to produce a comprehensible text. They realised that a descriptive paragraph must enable a reader to "create an image", that a good topic sentence is essential in orientating a reader to the topic of a paragraph, and that a paragraph without redundant sentences is more enjoyable to read. Therefore, assessment of the second affective LO showed more than was intended, which was that students would value reading novels and poems by other authors. It was not anticipated that this freshman class would construct their own understanding that writing and

reading are inseparable and that they should start by reading their own writing in order to improve it. A clear example of this was their joy in reading their own stories to children. This gave true meaning from the ground to the intended outcome that *students will value reading*. One valued it so much that he "tricked" himself into doing what he hated.

What better way to increase students' agency and enable them to find their voices than to devote a whole portfolio to a celebration of their uniqueness and individuality (Corley & Zubizarreta, 2012) as writers. Many educators believe that validating students as writers through the use of PA is likely to result in their increased confidence and, therefore, lower incidents of plagiarism. Narayanan (2018), for example, found a reduction in plagiarism through the use of ePortfolios by engineering undergraduates at a private college in Oman. Similarly, Sutherland-Smith (2008) found that teachers in Australia regularly replaced essays with portfolio assessment to help reduce plagiarism (p.197). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that the students in this study came to value academic honesty (LOa3) as they were encouraged to honestly evaluate their progress, strengths and weaknesses in writing, in a trusting environment, with reference to evidence to support their claims, and to write by hand their three-part academic honesty statement. For some, it became "the most important point" and "something natural". It required all students to play a more active role by declaring their academic honesty rather than merely going along with the often implicitly implied requirement that they avoid plagiarism.

Having students include all their written assignments which had been checked by their teacher, rather than select only their best, is somewhat consistent with Lam's (2018) view that portfolio contents depend on their purpose and that teachers can and should vary them accordingly (p.30). It was also somewhat consistent with teachers in an Australian study who had their students include all items that demonstrated their progress (Brady, 2001). It gave students more scope to direct their instructor's eyes toward certain elements of different assignments to support their claims, which resulted in a better outcome than if they had to omit assignments from the start. The instructor observed the pride and care with which they searched for and selected those relevant best examples.

The reasons for this departure from the norm are as follows. First, as beginning academic writers, seeing their written work accumulate enabled them to have a sense of achievement and to *"keep track of what I was using my time for" (2)*. Teachers in the Australian study also viewed portfolios as instruments of accountability which show that learning outcomes have been achieved (Brady, 2001). Second, requiring freshmen to choose their best items from the start, suggests that some items are less important than others, and nudges us uncomfortably closer to the product concept of best, rather than the process concept of getting better, which is the whole purpose of PA. Third, requiring students to choose presumes that they have the skills to do so, skills that are perhaps acquired only through extensive experience with academic writing. It is important to note that the reflections analysed in this study capture just *some* of the learning that took place; the assignments themselves tell a more complete story.

A frequent criticism of PA is that it involves extra work, but in this study the work was evenly distributed throughout the semester so that PA built on "normal classroom procedures"

(Olds, 1997, p.4). Weekly assignments (Zhang, 2009) received immediate feedback (Apple & Shimo, 2004) which is essential if students are to make progress. Final reflections took no more time to read and rate than a timed essay, but were of more value to students as they developed a sense of agency in evaluating their own writing.

5.1 Limitations and Possible Future Research

The validity, reliability and objectivity of portfolio assessment are a constant concern where there is only one rater, particularly when that rater is the students' instructor. However, such concerns are offset in this study by at least three factors: triangulation of data: where students submitted multiple writing tasks of different genres over a period of time; the consistent use of a rubric, which helped increase objectivity and minimize bias (Ragupathi & Lee, 2020, p.90); and the trusting relationship between students and their instructor-as-rater. Having multiple raters is desirable but not always possible due to time constraints on teachers and, as Elbow (1997) reminds us, "good teachers and evaluators routinely disagree about grades - and disagree widely" (p.127). The validity of students' portfolio reflections is enhanced when instructors have built up a relationship of trust with their students. Freshmen, who are just beginning to find their voice as writers, are more likely to benefit from evaluation by an instructor who has been there from the start of the semester, correcting their assignments twice weekly and overseeing their writing in class. Such oversight was critical in this study in ensuring that the work presented by the students was their own work, thus enhancing overall trustworthiness.

Although limited in size, the student sample nonetheless produced rich thick data which offers possible directions for future research. The two comparative studies to date in the Jordanian context were single-gender studies of secondary school students (males, by Al-Nethami, 2009, and females by Obeiah and Bataineh, 2016). This study combines both genders at tertiary level, which, in Obeiah and Bataineh's view, may enhance the potential generalizability of its findings. Further studies could replicate this study and build research from the ground which is truly representative of the local context. Future studies could also use multiple raters to grade students' portfolios and do quantitative studies to compare the benefits of PA with those of other forms of college writing assessment.

6. Conclusion

The current study has shown some of the potential benefits of using writing portfolios to assess course learning outcomes in a freshman writing course at a Jordanian university. It demonstrates the importance of students' evidence-based reflections, but they must be taught to reflect, as it does not come naturally or automatically (Allan & Driscoll, 2014). They can start with short, easy tasks, such as reflecting on their writing progress in weekly diary entries, evaluating their participation in class, or giving feedback to classmates on their project presentations. The instructor can then guide them toward making more reflective, analytical comments rather than simply narrating what they did.

Expanding the term reflection to 'evidence-based reflection' serves as a constant reminder to

students that they need to support their claims, not just in portfolio assessment or in writing, but in all areas of discourse. While the words reflection and evidence are frequently used separately in the literature (Baume, 2001; Zhang, 2009) few studies combine both. Neal (2016) stipulates the importance of that connection, of reading a student's reflection while viewing their "portfolio artifacts" and vice versa, "Claims without evidence are mere sentiments, while evidence without claims is trivial." (p.78)

This paper offers an invitation to instructors locally and regionally to try out PA as an alternative form of writing assessment to complement standardized testing. It is best done as a natural progression from their regular class work. This will enable further teacher-led research on the use of PA, about which there is a "dearth of local literature" (Bataineh et al 2007, p.436). It should not be made mandatory, however, bearing in mind the note of caution offered by Sahakian (2002) who, on reflecting on the birth and death of PA in her school in California, concluded "We will not bring about change merely by demanding obedience" (p.2). Instructors using PA must own it, in the same way that the early proponents of PA experimented with it and made it their own.

> There may be a lot of wisdom and scholarship about evaluation and writing program administration, but no one has really figured out how to do it right. There's no single right way to do it. There's room for plenty of experimentation and new knowledge. Therefore, we better give ourselves permission to experiment (Belanoff & Elbow, 1986, p.38).

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