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Portfolios: Innovative Practices for Teaching Sign Language Interpreters.

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Portfolios

One Answer to the Challenge of Assessment and the “Readiness to Work” Gap

PORTFOLIOS ORIGINATED in the fine arts as a collection of artifacts to demonstrate one's best works or accomplishments as well as the range of one's ability, skill, or knowledge. They are now used in a number of fields, especially in writing (Belanoff and Dickson 1991), in a variety of ways. One is an educational *assessment portfolio* in which a student compiles various documents that demonstrate mastery of identified skills and/or knowledge laid out by a standard or criterion. In this adaptation, this documentation would consist of items such as samples of written work, audiotapes and/or videotapes, letters, and awards.

In the Program of Sign Language Interpretation at Douglas College in British Columbia, we use a *graduation portfolio* to determine a student's mastery of program outcomes in order to qualify for graduation.¹ In the graduation portfolio, students compile written and videotaped evidence to demonstrate readiness to enter the field of ASL/English interpretation. Documents may include graded work from courses taken in the interpreting program, papers and videotapes developed specifically for the portfolio, excerpts from students' journals, and letters from professional interpreters and/or clients with whom the students worked during their practicum.

1. The portfolio process and requirements have evolved from the work of a number of individuals, including Marna Arnell, Roger Carver, Nigel Howard, Jan Humphrey, Janice Jickels, Karen Malcolm, Barb Mykle-Hotzen, Cheryl Palmer, and Debra Russell.

When submitted, portfolios are assessed by a team of three individuals: a faculty member, a professional interpreter, and a member of the Deaf community. Assessors use a scoring form on which they document the types of evidence provided (direct/indirect) and their determination of student mastery in each area and any notes or questions they may have. After reviewing the portfolio, an interview is held between the assessment team and the student. During the interview, assessors ask questions about portfolio contents, solicit additional information in areas with unclear or insufficient evidence, or clarify portfolio documents. Based on the portfolio and interview, the assessment team then recommends the student for graduation or remediation. The team determines what type of remediation is required and sets timelines for the submission of additional or revised portfolio sections. Depending on the team's degree of concern, a student may be required to complete the work assigned within six days, six weeks, or six months. The team reviews the remedial work submitted and reinterviews the student to determine if she or he is now qualified to graduate from the program.

EVOLUTION OF GRADUATION PORTFOLIOS AT DOUGLAS COLLEGE

In 1994 our faculty began discussing ways we could verify that our students were ready to work upon graduation.² We realized that our grading standards varied from the first to the fourth semester to account for students' evolving mastery of the knowledge and skills they were learning. As a result, we began to question the validity of assigning the same value to grades earned in all four semesters in determining if students were ready to graduate. We reviewed articles from the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development at the University of Texas that presented various creative approaches to student evaluation. We spent a great deal of time discussing the concept of critical thinking and reflection and made a

2. This discussion came about because of issues raised at the 1994 Conference of Interpreter Trainers meeting in Charlotte, N.C.

commitment to encourage students to develop the habit of thinking critically and reflecting on their work. Finally, we looked at the use of portfolios including use by academic institutions to evaluate teaching effectiveness and grant tenure, as well as use by instructors to evaluate student performance.

Knowing that we could not teach students everything in two years, we made a commitment to prepare students with the skills and knowledge required to enter the field and the tools necessary to support professional development and lifelong learning. Further, our faculty determined that it is critical for members of the Deaf community and professional interpreters to verify that our "product" is satisfactory to the consumers.

We began experimenting with a graduation portfolio as a summative evaluation approach to determine student readiness to graduate and enter the field in 1995. All fourth-semester courses are marked on a "mastery/nonmastery" basis. Graduation portfolios are submitted and form the summative basis of evaluation for all courses.

The format has gone through several iterations, and we have settled on a program outcomes base. Looking at the work of successful practitioners, we identified six student outcomes areas (see Figure 1).

Evaluation of Experience to Date

Our overall experience with the graduation portfolio has been quite positive. Assessors are pleased because students submit a three-inch, three-ring binder plus six to eight videotapes that are clearly marked for assessor review. Each section is distinct from the others, so skill-sets are more easily tracked by assessors as they determine whether the student has demonstrated mastery section by section. All materials presented are current, summative samples of the student's work—the interpreting and ASL samples are made three weeks prior to submission of the portfolio and reflect the student's language and interpreting skills at the point of request for graduation.

1. Communicate bilingually	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Produce and comprehend grammatically correct, register-variant ASL capable of sustaining near-native dialogues and monologues; ❖ Produce and comprehend grammatically correct, register-variant English capable of sustaining near-native dialogues and monologues; ❖ Identify linguistic features of ASL and English and discuss specific challenges of these differences for interpreters.
2. Act biculturally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Identify rules for social interaction in both the Deaf and hearing communities and discuss the role of hearing people on the Deaf community and related challenges for interpreters; ❖ Demonstrate appropriate attention-getting strategies, turn-taking behaviors, and other rules for social interaction in the Deaf community. Graduates will adapt these appropriately to a range of contexts and settings; ❖ Demonstrate appropriate attention-getting strategies, turn-taking behaviors, and other rules for social interaction in the English-speaking community. Graduates will adapt these appropriately to a range of contexts and settings.
3. Act ethically	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Demonstrate a pattern of critical thinking when making and discussing professional decisions; ❖ Discuss power, power structures, and systems within which one may work and the implications for interpreters; ❖ Identify the underlying principles of the Code of Ethics and relevant laws, applying them to professional decisions; ❖ Behave in ways that support and respect diversity; ❖ Act professionally in relationships with consumers, other interpreters, etc. (communicating, problem solving, negotiating, setting boundaries, etc.); ❖ Participate in professional organizations and upgrading, striving toward national certification.

Figure 1. Program Outcomes Criteria

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4. Interpret meaning
- ❖ Take in and analyze linguistic utterances (expressed and implied) and contextual factors to identify essential elements of meaning;
 - ❖ Produce an utterance in the target language that conveys the original meaning/intent and maintains dynamic equivalence between the individuals engaged in the interaction;
 - ❖ Monitor work and make corrections as needed;
 - ❖ Manage the overall interpreting process (e.g., decide on the use of consecutive or simultaneous interpreting, interrupting the speaker if need be, etc.).
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5. Take care of self
- ❖ Manage time effectively;
 - ❖ Care for self emotionally, physically, spiritually, and nutritionally by setting appropriate personal and professional boundaries/goals;
 - ❖ Establish support networks and maintain effective interpersonal communication;
 - ❖ Reflect on personal practice and set future goals.
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6. Use effective business practices
- ❖ Demonstrate effective interpersonal communications, acting respectfully with all people;
 - ❖ Engage in professional consultations (e.g., with team interpreter, interpreting or Deaf mentor, etc.), including appropriate preparation and debriefing of assignments;
 - ❖ Present a professional demeanor (appropriate attire and deportment) for various settings;
 - ❖ Follow field standards related to negotiating fees and contracts, self-marketing, invoicing, and accounting;
 - ❖ Communicate effectively in standard written business English.
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Figure 1. *Continued*

Program faculty have found a new level of accountability as we work side by side with community assessors. Because we work with the students semester after semester, we sometimes confuse our sense of student progress with current performance. More than once, a faculty member has said that a student showed satisfactory skill in an area, only to be challenged by one of the community assessors who brought "fresh eyes" to the project. These dialogues have led to one of the greatest benefits to the program. Members of the Deaf community and professional interpreters know that program faculty respect their input and will not certify a student for graduation until the whole team agrees that the student is ready to graduate. As a result, there is enhanced commitment to students and to the program, evidenced by the willingness of community members to volunteer in a number of ways.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GRADUATE PORTFOLIO

Introduction of Graduation Standards to Students

Graduation outcomes are available in our program brochure for review by potential students. Applicants are told about the graduation portfolio during the screening weekend prior to program admission. We want them to know all the program requirements as they select the program they want to enroll in. The expected outcomes are also referred to by instructors in all courses throughout the program, and students begin relating their learning and level of performance to the exiting standards as soon as they begin the program.

Supporting Students in the Development of Portfolios

During the third semester, we incorporate portfolio seminars into our schedule. In these seminars we discuss each competency area in depth and show students samples of successful portfolios. At this time, students are provided with an evidence guide that states required and optional documentation in each outcome area (see Figure 2). We invite program graduates in to share their portfolios and

Communicate Bilingually

- Required
- ❖ Submit a typed, double-spaced reflective paper (4–6 pages), defining the concept of “communicating bilingually” and give examples of your experiences in this area. Outline specific examples of linguistic difference between English and ASL and give examples of your evolving mastery of each language. Outline your plans for continued linguistic development over the next three to five years.
 - ❖ Complete the Canadian Sign Language Competence Interview at Level VIII or better. Include a copy of your interview results.
 - ❖ Provide two ASL language samples—one in which you give a 5-minute introduction of yourself to the Deaf member of your assessment team; a second showing a 10-minute dialogue between you and your fourth-semester ASL instructor.
 - ❖ Provide a sample of consultative register spoken English (10 minutes in length). You will use your final practicum seminar presentation for this sample.
- Optional
- ❖ Provide excerpts from class papers or projects demonstrating your mastery of this outcome.
 - ❖ Provide written feedback from practicum supervisors, college instructors, professional interpreters, or consumers, commenting on your abilities in this area.
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Act Biculturally

- Required
- ❖ Submit a typed, double-spaced reflective paper (4–6 pages) defining the concept of “bicultural behavior” and give examples of your experiences in this area. Outline specific examples of cultural differences between mainstream and Deaf cultures and give examples of your evolving mastery of each culture. Outline your plans for continued cultural evolution over the next three to five years.
 - ❖ Provide written feedback from practicum supervisors, college instructors, professional interpreters, or consumers, commenting on your abilities in both mainstream cultural interactions and Deaf cultural interactions.
- Optional
- ❖ Provide excerpts from class papers, journal entries, or class projects that demonstrate your mastery of this outcome.
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Figure 2. Graduation Portfolio Documentation

Interpret Meaning

- Required
- ❖ Submit a typed, double-spaced reflective paper (4–6 pages) defining the concept of “interpreting meaning” and give examples of your experiences in this area. Outline specific steps in the process of interpreting meaning and give examples to support your statements. Outline your plans for continued skills development in this area over the next three to five years.
 - ❖ Submit one or more videotapes of your interpreting work taken at a practicum site. Complete a self-assessment on the sample.
 - ❖ Submit three videotaped samples of your interpreting work based on stimulus material selected by the program (sign-to-voice; voice-to-sign; interactive). You will receive preparatory material for these assignments one week before you record the tapes. You will interpret with a partner. You may consult any preparatory sources or reference materials you wish. Complete a self-assessment on each tape, commenting on your preparation activities as well as the effectiveness of the teamwork between yourself and your partner.
- Optional
- ❖ Submit additional videotaped samples of your interpreting work with self-assessment;
 - ❖ Provide written feedback from practicum supervisors, college instructors, professional interpreters, or consumers commenting on your interpreting abilities.
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Act Ethically

- Required
- ❖ Submit a typed, double-spaced reflective paper (4–6 pages) discussing your understanding of professionalism and ethical behavior. Provide examples of your application of this principle to your work as an interpreter. Outline your plans for continued ethical/professional development over the next three to five years, including your action plan leading to AVLIC certification.
 - ❖ Provide letters or written feedback from practicum supervisors, college instructors, professional interpreters, or consumers, commenting on your decision making and actions regarding professional and ethical issues.
 - ❖ Provide proof of membership in WAVLI/AVLIC. Submit a brief paper (2–3 pages) discussing ways you have been/will be involved in WAVLI in the next three years.
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Figure 2. *Continued*

Act Ethically (*Continued*)

- Optional
- ❖ Provide excerpts from class papers or projects demonstrating your mastery of this outcome.
 - ❖ Provide comments from professional interpreters and/or consumers commenting on your ethical and professional choices.
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Take Care of Self

- Required
- ❖ Submit a typed, double-spaced reflective paper (4–6 pages) detailing your understanding of wellness and self-care. Explain how you have learned to deal with the challenge of wellness in your daily life. Include a statement of personal goals for continued growth in this area, along with an action plan of how you will accomplish these goals.
- Optional
- ❖ Provide a copy of your daytimer, clearly showing how you manage your time well. You may submit a simulated schedule or change identifying details as appropriate.
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Use Appropriate Business Skills

- Required
- ❖ Submit a typed, double-spaced reflective paper (4–6 pages) detailing what “appropriate business skills” means to you, providing examples of your use of these in your daily practice. Include a statement of personal goals for continued growth in this area over the next three to five years.
 - ❖ Provide samples of an invoice and details of the accounting system you will use for freelance work upon graduation. Include a statement of self-marketing strategies and tools you plan to use to start your freelance business.
 - ❖ Provide a cover letter and résumé applying for the type of job you plan to target upon graduation. Include a list of agencies, school districts, and so on where you plan to apply for work and explain why you are interested in working in the selected area.
- Optional
- ❖ Provide letters or written feedback from practicum supervisors, college instructors, professional interpreters, or consumers, commenting on your abilities.
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Figure 2. *Continued*

discuss their experiences in its development. Students are required to submit drafts of reflection papers in order to receive feedback regarding the content and clarity of their writing four months before portfolios are to be submitted.

PORTFOLIO EVIDENCE GUIDE

Assessing the Portfolios

Prior to submission of portfolios, the program coordinator sets up assessment teams and assigns three or four students to each team. On the day portfolios are submitted, all evaluators meet to review program standards, refresh memories regarding types of evidence, and actually evaluate one or two portfolios together. This ensures interrater reliability (see the scoring form in Appendix 1). Each evaluation team determines its approach to the task. Some teams choose to mark the portfolio together; others mark them independently and then come together to compare observations. Ultimately the team must decide unanimously whether the student satisfies program standards for graduation based upon the portfolio.

In reviewing portfolios, assessors are looking for evidence that a student can perform at a level necessary to begin work as an interpreter. This is an important point. Assessors are aware that students are on the cusp of graduation. With this in mind, assessors are not looking for perfection. Rather, they are looking for the following characteristics:

- Demonstration of emerging language, culture, and interpreting knowledge and skills
- Ability to reflect and synthesize learning
- Ability to self-assess interpreting work, interpersonal interactions, their emerging professional identity and values base, and decisions
- Use of professional language and ability to articulate professional standards
- Professional behavior, decision making, and demeanor
- Understanding of the field, plan for self-marketing, and commitment to lifelong professional development.

Recommendation Options

An evaluation team can make one of several decisions:

1. They may deem the student successful in all sections of the portfolio. In this event, they meet with the student to ask any clarifying questions they may have, encourage the student, and personally confirm that the faculty and representatives from the interpreting and Deaf communities believe they are ready to graduate.

2. They may deem the student mostly successful but not up to the standard in some areas. In this case, the interview takes on greater importance. If the student can convince the evaluators that she or he does have the knowledge or skill-set in question, the team can conclude that the student is ready to graduate. However, if the student is unable to clarify questions or demonstrate the knowledge/skills in question, the evaluators may send the student away with the portfolio to rework particular areas. In this event, a timeline and follow-up interview will be scheduled within two weeks to allow the student to graduate with her or his class. After reviewing the improved portfolio and conducting the second interview, evaluators determine whether the student is ready to graduate. Recommendations are made to the program coordinator regarding additional work required of this student.

3. They may deem the student's portfolio mostly unsuccessful. In this case, they usually return the portfolio and allow the student six months to work on it. After reviewing the improved portfolio and conducting the second interview, evaluators again determine whether the student is ready to graduate. Recommendations are made to the program coordinator regarding additional work required of this student.

SAMPLE CASE STUDIES

Student A submits her portfolio. Evaluators find it to be comprehensive, meeting program standards. They are satisfied that the student has the language and interpreting skills necessary to begin work as an interpreter. They have some questions of a minor nature to ask the student, as well as some suggestions and comments to

make to the student during the portfolio interview, but they generally agree that this student is ready to graduate. In this case, the interview is fairly short and focused. Assessment team members ask their questions, make comments on particular sections of the portfolio, confirm the student's job search plans, and compliment the student on her progress to date. They confirm recommendation for graduation and welcome the student as a new interpreter in the field.

Student B submits his portfolio. Assessors find it to be comprehensive and up to program standards in five of six sections. However, they are somewhat concerned about the area of interpretation. In the videotapes submitted, some successful samples of interpretation are shown—examples of conveying meaning between English and ASL, making appropriate linguistic and cultural adaptations. The videotapes also show some unsuccessful samples in which source language meaning is not conveyed in the target language. However, the assessors are not convinced that the student can analyze his work, delineating between successful and unsuccessful work, identifying errors, patterns, and strategies to resolve concerns. The team asks the student to view one of the interpreting tapes during the portfolio interview and to demonstrate the ability to analyze the work correctly. In this case, the student analyzes the work to the satisfaction of the assessment team. The interview continues, during which team members ask clarifying questions, make comments to the student regarding future plans, and so on. Because the team is satisfied that this student is ready to enter the field, they tell the student he will be recommended for graduation. In the event the student is unable to satisfy team members, they will ask the student to resubmit one or more self-assessment documents for the interpreting samples within a certain period of time. If the resubmitted work meets program standards, the student will be approved to graduate. If not, the student will be given an "incomplete" in all fourth-semester courses and placed on a learning contract, typically six months in length (see the sample contract in Appendix 2). When the remedial work is completed, the work is resubmitted to the evaluation team to determine readiness to graduate.

Student C hands in her portfolio, which seems carelessly put together. Written work lacks depth, clarity, and evidence of reflection.

The critique of interpreting samples is skimpy and does not indicate that the student can determine whether her work is successful. The evaluation team returns the portfolio to the student unmarked, requiring the student to redo the whole thing and submit it within ten days. When resubmitted, some areas of the portfolio are considered "up to standard," but other sections are still lacking. The team is concerned with (a) the student's inability to analyze interpretation accurately; (b) a lack of evidence that the student is able to interact appropriately with members of the Deaf community; and (c) the student's ASL skills. The team meets with the student and asks clarifying questions on the sections deemed up to par. They then explain their concerns about the remaining sections of the portfolio and outline an independent contract. The student is required to do the following:

1. Interpret three videotapes—one in July, one in August, and one in September—and complete an analysis of each. The July and August tapes are to be done with a colleague or mentor, and the student's goals are to identify successful/unsuccessful work, explain why each sample is/is not successful, identify errors and patterns, and outline strategies to resolve concerns. The September tape is to be submitted to the assessment team to replace work submitted in the original portfolio.

2. Contact a specific Deaf individual from the final practicum site and ask that person to contact the Deaf community member of the assessment team by e-mail to confirm the student's appropriateness when interacting with the Deaf community. This is to be completed by July 1.

3. Attend fifteen hours of Deaf community events between May and September, submitting a log of interactions in September. The student must provide evidence that interactions included a range of ages, settings, and degree of formality.

4. Retake the ASL interview and provide evidence of ASL skills at Level VIII by September 1.

The student contacts program personnel in late August and indicates that she has had difficulty completing the community hours due to conflicts in her summer working schedule and community interaction opportunities. Further, the student has been unable to

retake the ASL interview because the administering body has not been available in the summer months. A one-month extension is awarded. When the work is resubmitted, the team assesses it. They are satisfied with the quality and depth of all four requirements. They reinterview the student, ask some clarifying questions, verify job search plans, and confer recommendation for graduation.

SERENDIPITOUS BENEFITS

Clearly stated program outcomes inform prospective students of the program's expectations for a graduate. In addition, the portfolio gives us a holistic, integrated way to assess student readiness to graduate and enter the field of ASL/English interpretation. Several other benefits accrue as well.

Student Benefits

The first and greatest benefit of the graduation portfolio is to students. They graduate from our program with a clear sense that they are ready to work. They leave the program with samples of their work, the ability to discuss decisions they make, and the ability to work effectively with colleagues in the field. According to Malcolm (1996, 49–50), other benefits include the following:

1. Students consistently report having a strong sense of their own achievement through the development of the portfolio. Rather than relying on an instructor's assessment of their abilities and limitations, they report a confidence in their own judgment. They also report feeling pleasantly surprised at the amount they *do* know.
2. Students also state that materials they develop for the portfolio are directly useful in their job search. Résumés, business cards, and invoice forms as well as video samples of interpreting skills are immediately available for presentation. In addition, the degree of reflection required to assemble the portfolio prepares students to quickly respond to questions regarding their strengths and limitations, their understanding of cross-cultural communication, and their understanding of current issues in the field. Awareness of their

limitations also guides them in accepting or declining work and in preparing their own professional development plans.

3. Students feel validated by the community members' "stamp of approval" as opposed to being assessed solely by faculty members. This increases their confidence as they shed their student status and take their first tentative steps into the world of professional interpreting.

4. Finally, the cumulative nature of the portfolio encourages students to see the interconnectedness of their learning.

Relationship with Employers

The graduation portfolio allows us to verify student readiness to work. At a recent advisory committee meeting, one employer impressed upon the faculty the importance of this benefit. The committee was discussing the critical shortage of interpreters and steps the program could take to address the issue. This employer—who would not employ graduates from our program seven years ago—said, "Whatever you do to address the interpreter shortage, do not lower your standards. Employers have come to trust that Douglas College graduates are really able to do the job. Don't do anything to change that."

Relationship with the Community

The faculty respects the recommendations and decisions of the assessment team. This has had a powerful impact on our relationship with the community. They know we listen to them and that they have a voice in determining when a student is ready to work. As a result, their commitment to the program and to the students is very strong. Professional interpreters accept a first-year student as a "twin" to provide individual support and encouragement during the student's first year. Deaf community members volunteer to work with students in a variety of ways—as talent in interpreting role-plays, as tutors and culture guides, and so on. This has strengthened the program in many ways.

Program Evaluation and Curriculum Review

Finally, generation of a comprehensive list of skill and knowledge sets required for a beginning interpreter allows us to review our curriculum to verify that we are in fact teaching those skills and knowledge sets. It also allows us to identify knowledge or skills that we teach in our curriculum but did not include in our list, challenging us to ask whether these are essential areas of instruction. The graduation portfolio also provides a wonderful approach to program evaluation. If students are consistently weak in a particular skill or knowledge set, we know we need to return to our curriculum, identify that particular skill/knowledge set, and modify our approach to instruction. It also helps us reduce overlap and ambiguity.

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