

Collaborative Portfolio Assessment in Adult ESL

FAQ's

1. What is a language portfolio?

A language portfolio is a *selection* of examples of work that provides concrete evidence of a learner's progress in learning English. The important word here is *selection*. A portfolio does not include everything a learner has done throughout the course, but contains a representational sampling of items that the teacher and the learner think show what the learner has learned to do in English. In regular ESL classes, the portfolio should contain material related to the 4 skill areas of listening, speaking, reading and writing. In a skill-based program the portfolio would contain samples of work in that particular skill area. In an ESL Literacy class, the portfolio might also contain examples of numeracy activity. In an ESP or workplace course, the portfolio would contain language samples or activities reflecting the particular context of the course.

2. Why is collaborative portfolio assessment being introduced in Manitoba Adult ESL classes?

It is being introduced for a variety of reasons. One of the principle reasons is that it increases learner involvement in the assessment and monitoring of their own learning and is, therefore, consistent with Manitoba's stated principles of Adult ESL instruction. It encourages self-reflection and facilitates goal-setting, essential components of self-directed learning and important meta-cognitive strategies.

A second and equally important reason for its introduction is the increasing importance of portfolios in work and academic settings. More and more employers are asking to see work-related portfolios from prospective employees. A number of professional organizations require their members to maintain portfolios of on-going continuing education as one factor in license renewal. Portfolios have become the basis of the Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) process. Furthermore, several academic institutions use portfolios in their programs and even among school-age children in the K – S4 system, portfolios are increasingly prevalent. As it is one of our responsibilities as Adult ESL educators to help our learners meet their employment, academic and community goals, we have an obligation to help them develop the skills and knowledge to use this important tool.

A portfolio also provides the teacher with tangible data to help teachers determine CLB levels, as well as valuable documentation to refer to during learner/teacher progress interviews. It is a valuable means of capturing the scope of work accomplished during a course – thus, a decided benefit to learners, too.

3. What is meant by *collaborative* portfolio assessment?

This refers to a process in which teachers and learners together decide the contents of the portfolio and both can share opinions about learner progress. It is likely to be the teacher who initially suggests items to go into the portfolio; however, as learners become more familiar with the activity and the criteria for choosing work samples for the portfolio, they may take on more responsibility for the selection. This will no doubt depend on a variety of factors and some teachers may find they need to continue to direct the activity.

4. What about learners who are not objective about their learning progress and either assess themselves as too high or too low?

In a collaborative portfolio assessment approach, the emphasis is on *collaborative*. This is not a process in which the learner is the final determiner of the assessment level. It means the learner has an opportunity to do some self assessment with reference to concrete evidence. The teacher is ultimately the final arbiter; however, the learner has an opportunity to provide input. One can expect to hear comments, such as “I see why you think you are at this level, but when I look at your work samples, I don’t see the [complexity of sentences/ accuracy in spelling/ etc.] that I expect to see at this level,” or something like, “I think you are too hard on yourself. When I listened to you talk about your education, I heard well-organized language with good vocabulary and logical connectors. That is typical of a CLB such and such.”

5. Does portfolio material need to be kept in a folder, because that has cost and storage implications for programs?

We are suggesting that a portfolio is more a concept than a specific container. Certainly a portfolio might be a folder in which material is kept. However, a number of teachers with storage and portability concerns are having learners divide off a section of their binders and label it Portfolio. Other teachers are having learners put material into large heavy-duty envelopes that can be closed with a tie for privacy. Be inventive! What works for teachers who have their own classrooms that no one else uses may be very different from what works for the part-time workplace teacher teaching on the factory floor.

6. Is this going to be a lot of extra work for teachers?

When teachers introduce any new activity to learners that they have not done before, it takes some additional time both for the teacher to figure out exactly how they intend to introduce it and what particular resources they need. For example, as teachers began to use computers in the classroom, they needed time to learn about resources, to plan out how they would utilize computers and their various software programs and to introduce the programs, procedures and skills to the learners. Certainly, many teachers found they needed to provide substantial support and

direction initially. However, for most teachers, as they and their students became comfortable and familiar with procedures and programs, demands on teacher time and intervention lessened.

Any new initiative, whether it is beginning to use a new teaching resource or modifying instructional practice requires some additional time initially; however, as most teachers already make it a practice to collect samples of learner work for assessment purposes, it may just involve a minor shift in process. It all depends on how each teacher incorporates portfolios into their instruction.

7. Our Learner-Teacher interview is very short. How will I find time to talk about the portfolio as well as the learner's report card?

The report card is the record of the *CLB* levels the teacher has determined the learner is working within. The portfolio is a compilation of work samples. During the interview, as the teacher is discussing the learner's progress and the levels on the report, they can refer to various items in the portfolio to explain why they think the learner is at that particular level. They will not necessarily go through each item in the portfolio. When teachers ask learners to comment on their own progress, learners might show the teacher items in the portfolio that they are pleased with.

8. What kind of material would be appropriate in a portfolio?

It's pretty open-ended and depends on the focus of the course and level of learners. Any kind of material that a teacher would look at to determine a learner's level would be appropriate. Writing samples (possibly with the various versions before the final copy), tests, lists of books/stories a learner has read and completed questions on, a checklist of language tasks with the completed ones marked off, a tape of an interview or presentation, spelling tests, a completed answer sheet from a listening task, etc. might be some possibilities depending on level.

Do you have any other questions about the introduction of Collaborative Portfolio Assessment in Manitoba Adult ESL programs? Please send them to Joanne Pettis at jpettis@gov.mb.ca or give them to one of the following Portfolio Assessment Working Group members:

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