

# **Screenwriting education and assessment viewed through a constructivist lens**

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## Introduction

During the 25 years, since completing my undergraduate degree in Education, I have taught children and adults, in various private capacities and within primary or secondary school organizations across the province of Saskatchewan, Canada. For the past two years of this period I have assisted Bill Boyle, an award-winning screenwriter, to teach private adult screenwriting courses in a non-academic setting in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. This experience has prompted me to develop a screenwriting course of study, titled *A Primer in Content Creation: Screenwriting* (Mary F. Callele, in progress), for use at post-secondary institutions such as universities and film schools. While researching appropriate evaluation methods for this post-secondary course of screenwriting instruction, I became aware of the strength of my own theoretical grounding in constructivist philosophies. I soon realized that the tint of the constructivist lens, through which I view education, colors all aspects of course development including the implementation of the course and all attendant student assessment necessary for post-secondary institutions.

In this paper, I first provide context to situate my inquiry within the field of screenwriting education and describe the eclectic pragmatism of my teaching style. Then I identify the impact of constructivist theory on the teaching methods I use and show that these grounding assumptions affect every aspect of developing my screenwriting coursework. Finally I provide the constructivist-oriented evaluation construct that I employ during the formative and summative phases of the post-secondary course *A Primer in Content Creation: Screenwriting* (Mary F. Callele, in progress). I conclude

with offering additional areas for future study with respect to the impact of constructivism on screenwriting education.

Presently there is little scholarly writing focussed on screenwriting, so I have relied heavily on publications on constructivist philosophy, general writing evaluation and interviews with post-secondary writing educators.

## **Context**

*A Primer in Content Creation: Screenwriting* (Mary F. Callele, in progress), comprised of two-terms totaling 78 hours of screenwriting education, is targeted for use at post-secondary institutions such as film schools and universities. During the course of the first term of *A Primer in Content Creation: Screenwriting* (Mary F. Callele, in progress), the student submits, in order: a written concept summary, a logline, a short synopsis and an extensive diagnostic synopsis of their screenplay. The second term builds on this foundational work to complete the first draft of the students' original screenplay. The entire body of coursework allows the student to guide their own learning, based on the particular aspects of screenwriting on which they need to work. This is accomplished within a writing community that is developed as a safe, supportive atmosphere where all screenwriters share their writing often in class and assess it singly, in small groups and within the entire community. Peers are expected to respectfully respond to specifics, based on the rubric we use to evaluate, but never to equate the writer with their writing. The course, *A Primer in Content Creation: Screenwriting* (Mary F. Callele, in progress) allows each writer to improve through constant interaction and assessment within a secure screenwriting community.

Each student submission is self-assessed prior to being shared with the group. Then it receives written and/or oral responses from our writing community that is comprised of the screenwriter's peers and educator. The drafts are then re-worked and resubmitted numerous times through the same iterative process. Students evaluate the responses offered, use the suggestions that they deem of value and ignore the rest. Ultimately, the student is in control of what revisions are made to their screenplay and therefore guides their own development and the quality of product obtained. The educator is described as a screenwriting coach, available to assist the development of screenwriterly process and challenge the student to step beyond their comfort zone to develop their unique screenwriting voice and own original work.

The student is responsible for his or her own education and the educator remains a guide. During this term-long formative period, the students' writing is continuously assessed, but it is not graded. At the term's end, portfolios are submitted and graded numerically in order to satisfy institutional grading requirements. At no time do I identify the educator as an expert transferring knowledge. Though I acknowledge the existence of screenwriting principles, I suggest that these rules be viewed as time-tested guidelines, not absolutes. I believe that the learner comes to the screenwriting classroom with a distinctly individual and valuable background is compelled to write for various personal reasons, and needs opportunities and guidance rather than lectures and rules. Each screenwriter has unique stories to tell and arrives in the search of further learning opportunities that build on what they already know. Assuming they know nothing insults their intelligence and doesn't honor their past experience.

In the past, I had never consciously identified the epistemological assumptions on which I base the methods I had chosen for my screenwriting curriculum. However, upon investigating learning theory (Driscoll, 2000), I find that the teaching methods identified earlier in this paper, mirror the multitude of approaches that comprise a constructivist philosophy. According to Duffy and Cunningham (1996) "...theories provide their own lens into the world, with each theory providing a different lens (or perspective)" (p. 172). I view screenwriting education through a constructivist lens employing my assumptions at the ground level. These beliefs affect every aspect of course development for *A Primer in Content Creation: Screenwriting* (Mary F. Callele, in progress). According to Duffy and Cunningham (1996), these *grounding assumptions* are the "fundamental assumptions underlying our conception of the teaching-learning process" (p. 171). They are "always *assumed*", (and lead to) "...demonstrably different goals, strategies, and embodiments of instruction..." (Duffy and Cunningham, 1996, p. 171).

Driscoll (2000) states that, within constructivist approaches, "learners ... are not empty vessels waiting to be filled but rather active organisms seeking meaning" (p. 376). Rogoff (1994) identifies the adult-run model of education where students are "receptacles and knowledge is a product" (p.211). Duffy and Cunningham (1996) suggest that this top-down method of education exists in direct opposition to constructivist beliefs where students are considered active participants in their learning. Moffett (1968) echoes similar beliefs when he identifies the writer as having personal reasons to write, in order to "get certain effects on a definite audience" (p.193). The screenwriting student's valuable experience is brought to the classroom and the learning objectives developed from the student's own agenda contribute heavily to the learning that takes place.

Constructivists believe that education should be learner-based and that “knowledge must develop and continue to change with the activity of the learner” (Driscoll, 2000, p. 379). We also believe that “learning is a meaning-making and constructive process” (Gambell, 2001, p. 188), that the “constructivist approach implies that educators can more actively encourage students to construct meaning” (Gambell, 1999, p. 7) and that teachers must “respect the experiences the child brings to school” (Gilbert, 1989, p. 199). Similar constructivist beliefs are echoed in the writings of Hamp-Lyons (2002), Gilbert (1989), Robinson (2000) and Lensmire (1998), the interviews I conducted with Linda Richards (March 19, 2004) and Bill Boyle (March 19, 2004), and in my own teaching experiences.

Duffy and Cunningham (1996) provide a unique perspective from which to view constructivism. He states: “The term *constructivism* has come to serve as an umbrella term for a wide diversity of views...(with the) ...general view that (1) learning is an active process of constructing rather than acquiring knowledge, and (2) instruction is a process of supporting that construction rather than communicating knowledge” (p.171). Constructivists accommodate the view that learning is based on the activity in context. “Rather than the content domain sitting as central, with activity and the “rest” of the context serving a supporting role, the entire gestalt is integral to what is learned” (Duffy and Cunningham, 1996, p. 171). Duffy and Cunningham (1996) also offer: “The common ground of constructivism could be summarized by Von Glaserfield’s statement: “Instead of presupposing knowledge is a representation of what exists, knowledge is a mapping, in the light of human experience, of what is feasible” (1989, 134).” (p. 172). The educator is seen to “understand and challenge the learner’s thinking” (Duffy and Cunningham,

1996, p. 172), to offer the student a state of *puzzlement*, or *zone of proximal development* as Vygotsky (1934-1987) identified it. Whitehead (1929) presented a similar view: “Education is the acquisition of the art of the utilization of knowledge....” (p.4). In order to achieve this *acquisition*, Duffy and Cunningham suggest that the learner is simply trying “to make sense of the world....when the learner’s expectations are not met, and he/she must resolve the discrepancy between what was expected and what was actually encountered” (p. 175).

Driscoll, (2000), identifies a series of “constructivist conditions for learning” (p. 382). Each of these conditions correlates with other writing research as well as methods I have used to teach screenwriting during the period of 2002-2004. The conditions are as follows:

**1. “*Embed learning in complex, realistic, and relevant environments*” (Driscoll, 2000, p. 382).**

The overall goal, of completing an original screenplay, based on the students’ story-concept within two terms of coursework, adds complexity and relevance. This task encourages “problem-solving skills to be maximally facilitated” (Driscoll, 2000). Problem-solving skills develop when the student is faced with multiple learning goals, that are complex and scaffold or build on one another (Driscoll, 2000), thereby increasing the depth of learning. Duffy and Cunningham (1996) identify “the need to situate (e.g., Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989) or anchor (CTGV, 1992) learning in authentic, relevant, and/or realistic contexts” (p. 179). In my screenwriting course, *A Primer in Content Creation: Screenwriting*, the student is tasked with individual learning objectives developed from their own screenplay concept. An educator who acts as a tour guide,

rather than lecturer facilitates the attainment of these goals. The educator points out the necessary sights as the learner progresses along the their own personal learning trajectory. Teaching is not allowed to get in the way of the students' learning.

The screenwriting student faces multiple goals. The screenwriter must understand the structure of a screenplay in order to draw a clear storyline. The screenwriter must explore character development in order that the interaction between the protagonist and antagonist is believable. And, he or she must be able to identify the requirements of a visual story in order to manipulate the audience to keep their eyes on the screen. Some of these skills are already in the students' bag of tricks, and only need to be encouraged, but all of them are presented as necessary sights to see on any screenwriting tour. By using their learning to solve problems, students come to see the relevance of attaining smaller learning goals, as they progress toward their own larger goal.

**2. “Provide for social negotiation as an integral part of learning” (Driscoll, 2000, p. 382).**

Peer screenplay review is a valuable formative tool that I use in *A Primer in Content Creation: Screenwriting*. Duffy and Cunningham (1996) note that “learning is an inherently social-dialogical process. Hence, our reason for using groups is to promote the dialogical interchange and reflexivity” (p. 187). Social negotiation allows the screenwriter to learn to write by writing and testing the effectiveness of this writing by sharing it with groups of peers (Moffett, 1968). The learner then reworks their work developmentally, based on the feedback offered by themselves, their peers and the writing coach. “Feedback is any information a learner receives as a result of his trial” (Moffett, 1968, p. 188). The trial is submitting work to be reviewed and the feedback can

take the form of “his own perception of what he has done” (Moffett, 1968, p. 189), peer review (Driscoll, 2000), or the response of a teacher (Driscoll, 2000), (Moffett, 1968). It has been reported that this feedback can also cause the transformation of students, peers and teacher (Pea, 1994; Edelson, Pea, & Gomez, 1996), rather than causing only the transmission of information (Driscoll 2000). Driscoll (2000) explains the value of this process: “dialogue in a social setting is required for students to come to understand another’s view. Listening, or reading privately, is not sufficient to challenge the individual’s egocentric thinking” (p. 385).

Rogoff (1994) defines learning communities as places wherein “learning occurs as people participate in shared endeavors with others” (p. 209). The concept of “joint cognition, where the tutor provides support or scaffolding for the individual until the individual appropriates the knowledge or skill brings it under his conscious control for his own use” (Duffy and Cunningham, 1996). This reflects an apprenticeship methodology within constructivist writing instruction that is clearly an indication of a shift from teacher as expert to teacher as facilitator. As Duffy and Cunningham (1996) write: “We no longer teach, but rather we coach – we have moved from the sage on the stage to the guide on the side” (p. 184). In this constructivist view of screenwriting education, it must be accepted that “the learner may not mimic the coach, but the deviations are knowledgeable deviations that the learner can defend and the coach can respect” (Duffy and Cunningham, 1996, p. 185).

3. ***“Support multiple perspectives and the use of multiple modes of representation”***  
***(Driscoll, 2000, p. 382).***

Screenwriters tend to become blocked when they allow themselves to see a plot, dialogue or character problem from only one perspective. Encouraging the writer to take on the persona of their characters, to dramatize as they explore character motivations, and to critically analyze the plot from a different characters' point of view, often creates new paths to learning. "Revisiting the same material, at different times, in rearranged contexts, for different purposes, and from different conceptual perspectives is essential for attaining the goals of advanced knowledge acquisition" (Spiro et al., 1991, p.28). Duffy and Cunningham (1996) offer a useful explanation: "...we tend to assume that others see things in roughly the same way we do, and that our world view is constructed as largely invisible. Providing experience that elevates our world view to a conscious level typically entails bringing up alternative views for comparison...." (p. 178).

*A Primer in Content Creation: Screenwriting*, is arranged so that the student revisits the same concepts multiple times, in the contexts of writing loglines, short synopses and diagnostic synopses leading up to completion of the first draft. To edit, the learner often self-assesses while reading their work aloud. The group assesses through reading, listening or experiencing their own theatre-style reading of a screenplay. The concepts the screenwriters need to learn are often re-explored through viewing pertinent movies and reading the screenplays, or even the original plays, from which the motion picture may have been developed.

According to Duffy and Cunningham (1996), "learning is mediated by tools and signs....Vygotsky has proposed two mediational means: tools (technical tools) and signs (semiotic tools)" (p. 179), however the distinction seems blurred with respect to the use of tools like computers, usually considered technical tools and the written words, usually

considered signs, in screenwriting. I believe the distinction is often unnecessary, but the means are essential.

I employ the use of sights, scents, tastes, tactile objects and sounds, in order to encourage the development of sensory skills that add to screenwriting creativity. Driscoll (2000) agrees with my tactics when she states that “viewing the same content through different sensory modes (such as visual, auditory, or tactile) again enables different aspects of it to be seen” (pp. 387-388). Duffy and Cunningham (1996) contribute valuable insight: “...all distinctly human instances of learning are constructions situated within a context that employs some form of mediational means, tools, and/or signs” (p 180). For synthesis of the multiplicity in perspective and representation, I also turn to Duffy and Cunningham (1996): “...these means are very reminiscent of the multiple intelligences proposed by Howard Gardner (e.g., 1993): linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal” (p. 180).

#### ***4. “Encourage ownership in learning” (Driscoll, 2000, p. 382).***

Learning must meet the needs of the individual student who, in the constructivist model, does not passively accept the agenda of the teacher. The student is then in control of what, when, and how they learn (Driscoll, 2000; Hannafin, 1992). The teacher is most valuable when seen, by the student, as a facilitator, not an expert. Gilbert (1989) considers “text ‘ownership’ and student ‘authority’ over texts” (p. 198). Graves (1981) writes that “Most writers rent their pieces and the teachers own them” (p. 7). In constructivist theory, the student owns their writing and is responsible not only for working alone, or with peers and teacher to assess the state of the screenplay, but also to take ownership for any renovations that need to be made.

I have found, in my teaching, that when learners own the direction of their learning by choosing their own topics (Gilbert, 1989) and guiding their own learning (Linda Richards, personal communication, March 19, 2004), they take responsibility for the depth and breadth of it as well. The classroom becomes learner-oriented and the student chooses which problems to solve, in what order, and “the reasons become clear as to why information and skills should be learned...” (Driscoll, 2000, p. 389).

In screenwriting, solving one problem often reveals another and the writing process continues in a cyclical manner until the learner is satisfied. I believe that “the teacher may have some specific learning objectives in mind” (Driscoll 2000, p. 380), but should operate as a tour-guide, pointing out the sights that must be seen, but not trying to control the gaze of the tourist. Dodd (1997) states a generally accepted fact that “students do their best work when they feel some ownership of the task” (p. 268) and Gilbert (1989) writes that the teaching of students, is “relatively incidental to this process” (p. 98) once this state of personal ownership is achieved. My experience with adult screenwriters, who often learn far beyond the scope of the course requirements, compels me to agree.

**5. *“Nurture self-awareness of the knowledge construction process” (Driscoll, 2000, p. 383).***

Once the student attains a level of reflexivity, or the awareness of their own role in the learning process, they can then begin to accurately assess their own work. Because rewriting makes up a large portion of the total screenwriting process, this skill becomes invaluable. Once a student is capable of self-assessment, the student can employ a process of editing that depends on a deeper level of understanding than simple

mechanics. Driscoll, 2000, sums up this type of understanding: “In other words, when learners come to realize how a particular set of assumptions or worldview shapes their knowledge, they are free to explore what may result from an alternate set of assumptions or a different worldview” (p. 390).

To build this self-awareness, or reflexive metacognition, I ask students to edit their own and their peers’ work, to act as resources for each other, and to teach each other skills that they, themselves, have already learned. I argue, as did Vygotsky (1934/1987), and Perkins (1991b), that “it is the job of the constructivist teacher...to hold the learners in their ‘zone of proximal development’ by providing just enough help and guidance, but not too much” (p. 20). All writing is like an expressive dance between both artist and technician and the constructivist approach encourages a metacognitive awareness of this process.

I conclude from my research of learning theory, that constructivist approaches drive the methods I use to teach screenwriting. That said, I also believe that constructivist beliefs should drive the evaluation methods I use as well. In the next section, I define two different aspects of screenwriting assessment and identify their symbiotic relationship. These complementary evaluation tools allow ongoing constructive, non-adversarial assessment to take place during the entire teaching term, and also provide objective student ranking with accountable numerical grading, to be carried out at the terms’ end.

## **Assessment**

At post-secondary institutions, numerical evaluation of student work is accepted as necessary. This belief is illustrated by a quote from Broadfoot (1979): “assessment practices are one of the clearest indices of the relationship between school and society

since they provide for communication between the two” (p. 11). Even prior to entry into post-secondary institutions, evaluation is an issue, as one considers “entrance requirements to post-secondary institutions and other tertiary-level decisions based on grades” (Gambell, 1999, p. 9). Robinson (2000), notes that assessment “provides students with qualifications....and by virtue of their assessment, teachers can limit or open opportunities for students” (p. 255). When a certificate or degree, from an educational institution with a respected reputation, opens school or career opportunities for the recipient, it also makes this assessment “an implicitly political act” (Hamp-Lyons, 2002, p. 5) that sets students and teachers up as adversaries (Elbow, 1994). This adversarial relationship does not follow constructivist theory, however without an assessment system in place, institutions would not be able to rank students and justify the awarding of scholarships, certifications and degrees. In this fashion, evaluation is accepted as a necessary aspect of education.

Evaluation choices reflect the dichotomy within the educators role: “it’s inherent in a teacher’s job to try to accept and welcome all students, yet also to try to reject those who are not worthy” (Elbow, 1994, p. 40). All teachers are expected, by the institutions they represent, to reject or advance students using their chosen grading systems. High-stakes assessment makes it essential that the grading systems be not only both quantifiable and accountable to the institution for which they are carried out, but also clearly indicative of the body of work the student has performed for the course in question (Linda Richards, personal communication, March 19, 2004). This is a tall order for any evaluation system to deliver, but I believe that it is attainable and benefits from a constructivist approach to teaching and learning.

“Traditionally, assessment is an activity undertaken after learning is accomplished: Communicate some knowledge, then test to see if the knowledge has been successfully stored by the learner....” (Duffy and Cunningham 1996, p. 186). During my 25 years of teaching experience, I have found this fill-the-vessel, then measure-the-quality-of-timed-regurgitation method of evaluation to be less than optimum, especially for writing assessment. Coincidentally, I have embraced research “introducing such terms as performance assessment, portfolios, authentic assessment...the process of building a technology of assessment based on constructivist principles” (Duffy and Cunningham 1996, p. 186). I turn to the recent history of writing assessment for support and guidance.

Since 1950, writing assessment practices have moved through three distinct periods. According to Yancey (1999), from 1950-1970, purely objective testing was the norm, being replaced during 1970-1986 by holistic scoring of timed writing. The third of three waves, of latter 20<sup>th</sup> century writing evaluation, is portfolio assessment, which has displaced the others since 1986 (Yancey, 1999). In contrast, Hamp-Lyons (2001) argues that holistic assessment came first and that objective multiple choice testing became the accepted replacement. Whether assessment of writing developed from objective to holistic, holistic to objective or that the two methods have come to co-exist, “there is little disagreement that the last 15 years of the twentieth century turned the attention of writing assessment specialists...to portfolios as a fruitful form of assessment” (Hamp-Lyons, 2002 p. 10). Elbow (1994), adds his spin to portfolio use, stating that “a portfolio is nothing but a folder, a pouch – an emptiness: a collection device and not a form of assessment...but portfolios lend themselves to assessment” (p. 40). I accept Elbow’s definition of portfolios as collection devices, and postulate that their use opens the door

to developmental assessment, without jeopardizing the constructive alliance between student and teacher.

***Complementary Forms of Evaluation.*** Robinson (2000), identifies developmental evaluation as being diagnostic or “formative assessment, those things that teachers do...to gain immediate feedback on what students are learning” (p. 256). The Center for Effective Teaching and Learning, or CETal (2004), similarly identifies the formative aspect of evaluation. Formative evaluation is identified as “prospective”, to “analyze strengths and weaknesses towards improving”, to “develop habits”, to “shape direction of professional development” and provide “feedback” (CETal, 2004). CETal also identifies a complementary aspect and calls it summative evaluation, which is “primarily retrospective”, “document achievement”, “documenting habits”, shows “results”, and is based on “evidence” (CETal, 2004).

I find that the varied requirements of screenwriting assessment for *A Primer in Content Creation: Screenwriting*, are met by employing both the formative and summative aspects of evaluation. The complementary aspects of both assist in maintaining a “transactional, response-oriented curriculum rationale” (Robinson, 2000, p. 261), instead of accepting the traditional, transmissional, information-oriented rationale (Robinson, 2000), that encourages adversarial student/teacher interaction.

***Formative portfolio assessment.*** In constructivist pedagogy, it is essential that the teacher be seen as an ally, rather than an adversary (Elbow, 1994), a facilitator, rather than an expert (Bill Boyle, personal communication, March 19, 2004) and a guide, rather than a taskmaster (Linda Richards, personal communication, March 19, 2004). Learning must be student-oriented, diagnostic and focussed on the question “what do you need to

know in order to write this better?” (Linda Richards, personal communication March 19, 2004). Formative assessment in screenwriting allows both teachers and learners to be focussed on the writing process, rather than on the grading process. It allows the learners to develop “the abilities to self-assess and to provide constructive feedback to team members...this is not only an assessment process but also a learning process.” (Duffy and Cunningham, 1996, p. 194).

Elbow (1994) offers an explanation. “Portfolios reward students for using good writerly process: to explore a topic in discussion and exploratory writing; to complicate their thinking; to allow for perplexity and getting lost; to get feedback; to revise; and to collaborate” (Elbow, 1994, p. 41). These techniques are echoed by Linda Richards (personal communication, March 19, 2004) and clarified by Jones (1997). Jones expects her students to show that they do indeed “follow through on any writing they undertake...including the various drafts, self-assessments, peer responses, and teacher response is included in the portfolio” (Jones, 1997, p. 255).

At the beginning of the term, students are provided with a rubric or set of criteria that incorporates all of the course requirements and indicates the marking scheme to be used for assessment (Linda Richards, personal communication, March 19, 2004). Every writing draft reviewed by students or teacher is subject to these guidelines and any conferencing, whether weekly or less often, is also based on this criterion.

Writing portfolio assessment practices are strongly advocated by Gilbert (1994), Gaughan (1999), Lensmire, (1998), Richardson (1991), and Phelps (2000). However, they all caution against teachers actively, or accidentally, using their responses to direct student revisions or to shift attention from the student voice to their own. Lensmire

(1998) sums up this concern: “encouragement is sometimes not far from coercion in the classroom given the unequal power relations among teachers and students” (p. 274). Richardson (2000) also found that students have been conditioned to respond to teacher responses, on their ungraded work, as if the suggestions were orders. This is because “students are convinced that teachers know the “correct” way to write, or at least the way they must write to succeed in class” (p. 127). “The consequence of this view... is that the student’ inquiry is not honored....learners quickly discover that the goal is not inquiry or exploration of a domain but rather discovering what the teacher wants....” (Duffy and Cunningham, 1996, 182). If written teacher responses are non-directive, non-judgmental and sometimes offered in an open-ended question format, students are less likely to interpret them as demanding conformity or evidencing oppression (Richardson, 2000). Richardson has also modified the formative conferencing feedback process to include being “willing to suggest possible solutions to writing problems after listening to students’ efforts to articulate their intentions” (Richardson, 2000, p. 138).

Elbow (1994) identifies evidence of collegiality to be the greatest benefit of the formative aspects of portfolio assessment. Teachers can “be ally to students for virtually all of the semester: students don’t need to fight us as the enemy, because the more help they get from us, the better their portfolios will be and the higher their grades” (Elbow, 1994, p. 41). This may be the single most powerful indication that formative assessment practices will continue to receive positive responses from both teachers and students in the future.

***Summative portfolio assessment.*** Jones (1997) states “quality counts, getting finished and meeting some kind of deadline counts too” (p. 256). I add that meeting the

criteria of excellence in writing, and being rewarded for it with good grades, counts as well. This is the basis behind summative portfolio assessment. The end of the course is when the buck stops and at the moment it stops, teachers “don’t have to hold back on critical standards since we’ve already given students so many opportunities to improve their work” (Elbow, 1994, p. 41). During summative assessment, “portfolios introduce the dimension of *time*” (Elbow 1994, p. 40). Portfolios also allow teachers to “get inside their learning...to know what concepts, strategies, and skills matter most” (Romano, 1994, p. 73). Summative evaluation that focuses on the product of the students’ labors should include input from both the student and teacher. It should also be recorded in an objective manner to justify, to both student and educational institution, the grade earned by the student.

Constructivist approaches emphasize student input, and even in the final evaluation of their portfolio, the student should have a voice (Linda Richards personal communication, March 19, 2004). Richards and Jones (1997) both instruct their students to build their final portfolio, by including self-chosen pieces of writing and the drafts that preceded these final pieces. A preamble, or letter of introduction to the portfolio, sets the context of the writing and identifies the strengths and weaknesses that have been identified during the term. Jones (1997) maintains “each individual student should be challenged; and no one is in a better position than the students themselves to know whether they have been challenged and whether they have achieved their goals” (p. 255). The students are asked to evaluate their own work, justify their grade in writing, and hand it in with their portfolio to be assessed as part of the teachers’ final evaluation.

Finally, portfolios are graded through a number of methods or in a combination of some of the methods named here.

- ◆ the “Freeport High School scoring guide” (Dodd, 1997, p. 267), that Linda Richards (personal communication, March 19, 2004) adapted for use
- ◆ “Essay Evaluation” rubric provided by Joel Deshayé (personal communication, May 06, 2004).
- ◆ “portfolio assessment criteria” (Jones, 1997, p. 260)
- ◆ an analytic scoring guide “Process and Product Evaluation” (Robinson, 2000, p. 265).
- ◆ the rating point exemplar rubric as identified by Penny (2003)
- ◆ other holistic writing assessment methods, analytic scoring matrices or rubrics specially developed for the course at hand or the institution for which it is offered

Summative portfolio scoring must be consistent with the criteria provided to the students at the beginning of the course and must include numerical grades if these are required in order to conform to the directives that individual institutions provide for their faculty. In summative portfolio evaluation, the final score provided is a sophisticated distillation of much more than a few test and assignment scores. In this fashion, the scores will also be accountable, justifiable and indicative of student achievement over the time period of the course.

Jones (1997) quotes an anonymous student to indicate that her students appreciated portfolio self-assessment. “The quality of the writing has improved...self-assessment is very important...it helps to develop your awareness of the writing process

and shows you what you have really attempted and where you have succeeded...I became more interested in probing my ideas and developing them beyond just a simple exploration” (p. 263). Weiser (1994) adds, “student evaluations about grading fairness in general and the portfolio system specifically have been positive” (p. 228). Finally, Richards sums it up by indicating that her students’ evaluations are astute and assist her own evaluation process (personal communication, March 19, 2004).

The following is my adaptation of the “Freeport High School scoring guide” (Dodd, 1997, p. 267) synthesized with a rubric provided by Joel Deshaye (personal communication, May 06, 2004). This rubric is to be shared with the students at the beginning of the term and used by all as a formative assessment guide within the learning community and during one-on-one conferences with students.

## **Screenwriting Portfolio Evaluation Rubric**

### ***A Primer in Content Creation: Screenwriting***

#### **1. Unacceptable - Poor in overall quality (<50)**

- ◆ Characterized by brief pieces that are unoriginal and uncreative in style
- ◆ Plagiarized, incomplete or incomprehensible
- ◆ Major mechanical and technical weaknesses and few, if any, strengths
- ◆ The portfolio and individual pieces of writing seem to have been put together with very little time and thought.

#### **2. Weak to Developing - Below average in overall quality (50-59)**

- ◆ The writing may be unclear, unfocused, or including some technical errors
- ◆ The writing is usually thin in substance and undistinguished in style

- ◆ Writing may be either short and undeveloped or abstract and vague
- ◆ Little evidence of ability to handle varied screenwriting tasks
- ◆ Structural flaws, carelessness, weaknesses clearly predominate.
- ◆ In the “2” portfolio, the writer relies heavily on formulas, stereotypes and cliches.

### **3. Basic to Functional- Fair in overall quality (60-69)**

- ◆ Some areas of the portfolio may be too brief or underdeveloped
- ◆ Some evidence of ability to handle screenwriting tasks successfully and to use language effectively
- ◆ Positives are mirrored by recurring problems in either or both content and style
- ◆ Technical and mechanical errors are few but notable
- ◆ Lacks both a clear sense of purpose and a distinctive voice
- ◆ Strengths and weaknesses tend to be evenly balanced either within or among pieces.
- ◆ The "3" portfolio suggests competence in writing but is usually bland and uninspiring

### **4. Consistent to Competent- Good in overall quality (70-79)**

- ◆ Competent in content and style; may be superficial errors
- ◆ Successful but not ambitious or vice versa
- ◆ Inconsistent demonstration of ability to handle a variety of screenwriting tasks successfully and to use language effectively
- ◆ Sense of audience and task, but may seem formulaic or lacking a strong voice
- ◆ There are more strengths than weaknesses, but there may be an unevenness of quality
- ◆ There seems to be minimal risk-taking or originality

- ◆ The "4" portfolio demonstrates competence in writing

#### **5. Proficient - Very good in overall quality (80-89)**

- ◆ Substantial in content, though more development is possible
- ◆ Formulas successfully abandoned
- ◆ Few mechanical or technical flaws
- ◆ Uses language effectively, but not as creatively as a "6"
- ◆ Demonstrates ability to handle varied screenwriting tasks successfully
- ◆ Voice is clear and distinct, if not powerful.
- ◆ Sense of audience is clearly present, if not always firm
- ◆ The "5" portfolio takes fewer risks and completed them less successfully than a "6"

#### **6. Exceptional - Excellent in overall quality (90-100)**

- ◆ Substantial in content (length and development)
- ◆ Mature in style; engaging
- ◆ Virtually flawless mechanics
- ◆ Demonstrates ability to handle screenplay challenges successfully
- ◆ Uses language creatively and effectively
- ◆ Displays screenwriting elegance beyond simple proficiency
- ◆ Originality with a strong voice
- ◆ Clear sense of audience and context
- ◆ Often, there is a loose connection between the writer's sense of self and the writing.

- ◆ A "6" portfolio typically takes risks that work - either in content or form

## Conclusion

My eclectic approach to screenwriting education and evaluation, though developed through years of experience and necessity rather than directly from a theoretically justified body of research, clearly employs constructivist theory. This constructive approach adapts well to the collection of student writing that portfolio evaluation provides. The complementary aspects of formative and summative portfolio assessment fit the constructivist requirements for *A Primer in Content Creation: Screenwriting* and provide for a numerical grade to be awarded students in post-secondary education institutions.

Finally, the implications of my research findings are important not only to those teachers developing screenwriting teaching and evaluation methods from a constructivist perspective, but also for anyone tasked with the teaching and evaluating of writing.

***Opportunities for further research and development.*** The body of research focussed on screenwriting evaluation may be slight, but the academic offerings on constructivism and writing evaluation are vast. My research has suggested many new concerns that I have neither space nor time to explore in this paper. I list a few of these research and development topics for future reference.

- ◆ to perform a case study analysis comparing traditional, *lecturing to an empty vessel*, method of teaching and evaluating screenwriting education to the constructivist, *learner-centered*, screenwriting course employing screenwriting portfolio assessment

- ◆ to create constructivist submission criteria for screenwriting portfolios
- ◆ to perform action or case study research in the evaluation of screenwriting portfolios from the perspective of the educator and/or the student
- ◆ to identify the effects of a learning community on screenwriting education and evaluation
- ◆ to assess the effects of formative and summative screenwriting evaluation methods on student screenwriting voice

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