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# Putting the Teaching Portfolio in Context

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The current education reform movement has focused increasing national attention on the teaching of undergraduates. Green (1990) identifies five factors that have fueled this renewed emphasis on teaching: (a) the aging academic workforce, sometimes referred to as the “graying of the professoriate”; (b) the “plateauing” phenomenon, arising from retrenchment and lack of mobility; (c) changing work values, which emphasize individual rights and de-emphasize bureaucracy; (d) increasingly heterogeneous student bodies, including minority, older, part-time, and underprepared students; and (e) accountability, which encompasses the entire assessment movement.

The latter two factors seem particularly important. Cross (1986), in *Taking Teaching Seriously*, emphasizes two vocal groups of students in the current “buyer’s market”: “First is the group of low-performing students who *need* good teaching if the access revolution is to have meaning. Second are the adults who are likely to *demand* good teaching if they are to give time and money to the tasks of learning” (p. 2). Such students, Ekroth (1990) notes, must also be taught vital skills: “Today’s professors are challenged to teach a student population increasingly diverse in age, levels of academic preparation, styles of learning, and cultural background. Professors are now expected not only to ‘cover the material,’ but also to help students to think critically, write skillfully, and speak competently” (p. 1). Meeting the challenge of these students requires, as Boyer (1987) suggests, a “renewed interest in general education, in the quality of teaching, and in the evaluation of the undergraduate experience” (p. 7).

Seldin (1990) describes the “demand for faculty accountability” as “a groundswell sweeping across the nation. It has enlisted taxpayers, institutional trustees, financial donors, parents, and students to press colleges and universities to examine the performance of each professor” (p. 3). Hutchings

(1990), in *Assessment and the Way We Work*, emphasizes the need to view assessment in its richest sense as “an enactment of a set of beliefs about the kind of work that matters on our campuses.” Such work demands:

- (1) That teaching be taken seriously and rewarded;
  - (2) That assessment not only values teaching, it has a view of learning;
  - (3) Finally, that the culture of assessment is one in which we not only aim toward a particular kind of learning but hold ourselves *accountable* for it; where accountability is not a dirty word (what “they” want), but part and parcel of the way we work.
- (pp. 6-7)

The scrutiny engendered by accountability is thus not necessarily negative. Philosophical explorations of what it means to be teachers and learners have led to far more emphasis on “cooperation,” “collaboration,” and “community.” The works of Astin (1985, 1987), Boyer (1987, 1990), and Palmer (1983, 1987) highlight dialogue, discussion, and learning communities.

Educators are realizing more and more that “good teachers must be active learners themselves and model for students an active mind at work on significant intellectual tasks” (Cross, 1988, p 7). Peterson (1990), in her Chair’s Address at the College Composition and Communication Convention, emphasized that new theories are opening up lines of inquiry into the nature of teaching and redefining the role of the teacher:

Our current theories demand that we be more than doctors diagnosing problems and prescribing corrective measures, more than entertainers pleasing an audience, more than high priests initiating the chosen into our rituals, more than managers assigning tasks and schedules, more even than coaches who alternately model, critique, cajole, and encourage. Our theories demand that we enter classrooms as knowledgeable, committed learners, willing to join students in the process of learning. This is not a return to the rather thoughtless, atheoretical student-directed practices of 20 years ago, but a tougher stance. It requires respecting students in the deepest sense and recognizing both their integrity and our own as learners. (p. 31)

To encourage movement from thought to action, the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) has launched a new program entitled “The Teaching Initiative,” which is sponsoring projects: (a) to develop cases about college teaching and learning; (b) to improve the training of teaching assistants; and (c) to develop the use of “teaching portfolios” as vehicles for faculty to document and display the quality of their teaching through actual work samples and reflections on those samples.

For many reasons, the teaching portfolio promises to be a particularly viable means to strengthen undergraduate education: (a) it is cost-effective; (b) it is rooted in the context of discipline-related teaching; (c) it debunks the myth that effective teaching cannot be documented; (d) it gives faculty “ownership” of the portfolio process, building on intrinsic motivation; and (e) it capitalizes on the power of constructive consultation to generate meaningful change.

## What is the Teaching Portfolio?

Several assumptions underlie the teaching portfolio. First, the teaching process must be viewed as fluid and dynamic, evolving over time. Second, because of the complex nature of the teaching process, evidence of effectiveness must be collected over time from multiple sources to give an accurate, in-depth overview. And, third, teachers themselves—with consultation—should direct the portfolio process, selectively recording teaching accomplishments and reflecting on the choices that result in exemplary teaching.

The portfolio itself, usually described as a 3-5 page document that summarizes teaching strengths, can be incorporated into the *curriculum vitae*. It is backed up by extensive support, often available in appendices, just as a CV emphasizing scholarly research will refer to, but not include, specific documentation. It is important to strike a balance between too much material and too little. Seldin (1990) describes the teaching portfolio as “a factual description of a professor’s major strengths and teaching achievements. It describes documents and materials which collectively suggest the scope and quality of a professor’s teaching performance. It is to teaching what lists of publications, grants, and honors are to research and scholarship” (p. 4). Waterman (1990) describes it as “a document that a faculty member creates to communicate teaching goals, to summarize accomplishments, and to convey the quality of teaching” (p. 1).

The Teaching Assessment Project at Stanford (Wolf, 1990) relies on teams that specify key teaching tasks on which to focus a portfolio’s content. The portfolios themselves contain both captioned artifacts and written commentaries. Thus, portfolios are both selective and reflective, with an emphasis on supported judgments. Building on this work, Edgerton (1991), in fact, endorses a concept of “The Portfolio as Display of Best Work,” distinguishing it from what he terms “The Portfolio as Teaching Resume.” In this type of portfolio, which focuses on the characteristics of exemplary teaching and the best way to document and display them, four critical tasks form the core: “Planning and preparing for the course; teaching the course; assessing what students learned in the course, and giving them feedback; and keeping up

with the evolving professional discourse about their field and how to teach it” (p. 6). In this approach, portfolio entries consist of work samples tied to reflective explanations in order to “promote a view of teaching as a ‘situated act’” (p. 2).

Shore, Foster, Knapper, Nadeau, Neill, and Sim (1986), in a publication of the Canadian Association of University Teachers, *The Teaching Dossier: A Guide to Its Preparation and Use*, provide a detailed summary of items that can be included in a teaching portfolio, organized as: (a) products of good teaching; (b) material from oneself; and (c) information from others, including students and colleagues. (See Appendix A for a similar list of possible inclusions compiled by Waterman.) They also outline five useful steps for creating a portfolio: (a) clarify teaching responsibilities; (b) select criteria for effective teaching; (c) order the criteria; (d) compile back-up evidence; and (e) incorporate the dossier into curriculum vita.

The portfolio concept has a long history. It has been used for decades by artists, photographers, and architects to document creativity and expertise. Knapper (personal communication, July 23, 1990) also points out that the teaching dossier has been used in academic circles in Canada since the mid-1970’s. *The Teaching Dossier: A Guide to Its Preparation and Use*, initially written in 1980 and revised in 1986, has been widely distributed all over North America and beyond.

Teaching Portfolios are typically compiled for two reasons: (a) to facilitate personnel decisions, specifically promotion and tenure judgments (summative evaluation) or (b) to shape future teaching improvements by documenting and reflecting on past achievements (formative evaluation). The purpose of the portfolio will often dictate its contents. Portfolios intended for promotion and tenure decisions usually contain core materials, such as syllabi and student evaluations, to ensure valid comparisons. Those developed by faculty interested primarily in their own professional growth and development usually reflect more flexibility in their contents and approach.

Virtually everyone familiar with the teaching portfolio—or with instructional improvement in general—recognize that evaluation procedures can play a dual role if handled sensitively. Whitman and Weiss (1982), for instance, argue that “the conflict between faculty development and evaluation is not inherent . . . if it is accepted that both purposes share the long-range goal of improved instruction and student learning” (p. 10). Baker and Mezei (1988) state explicitly that “faculty assessment and faculty development programs should form an interdependent and continuous cycle, supported by a climate of encouragement and reward of initiatives toward

professional growth and renewal” (pp. 101-102). Seldin and Annis (1991) emphasize that:

It is important to keep in mind that use of the portfolio for personnel decisions is only occasional. Its primary purpose is to improve teaching performance. And it is in the very process of creating the collection of documents and materials that comprise the portfolio that the professor is nudged to: 1) mull over personal teaching activities, 2) rearrange priorities, 3) rethink teaching strategies, 4) plan for the future. Properly developed, the portfolio can be a valuable aid in professional development activities. (p. 4)

## **Five Reasons for the Viability of the Teaching Portfolio**

The teaching portfolio promises to be a potent means to encourage a renewed emphasis on teaching and to promote the fair and objective evaluation and development of faculty.

1. First, the Teaching Portfolio can be cost effective. The belt-tightening on virtually all campuses makes costly innovations to improve undergraduate education unlikely. Mohrman (1991), Dean for Undergraduate Studies at the University of Maryland at College Park, recognizes, as most administrators do, that financial realities will have an impact on reform. “Budget woes will slow us down [at the University of Maryland at College Park]. We’re going to be looking at things that don’t cost a lot of money” (p. A37). Departmental implementation of teaching portfolios, particularly with an emphasis on collegial consultations, will definitely require investments in time and commitment that translate into dollars. As Lacey (1990) notes: “Collegiality is costly” (p. 99). But because teaching portfolios can be integrated into current evaluation processes without major disruptions (Seldin, 1990, p. 21), such investments can be accomplished by shifting priorities within a department. In uncertain economic times, when funding requests to state legislatures, to foundations, or to private and corporate donors may go unheeded, individual departments unable to initiate more costly teaching reforms such as extensive TA training or reduction of class sizes, can still initiate a portfolio process by rethinking and reallocating faculty time and commitment.

With positive support and leadership from the chair, faculty can focus on procedures, policies, and timetables to implement the portfolio process. Faculty must “buy into” the portfolio process and commit the time and effort needed to work on their own teaching and to serve as consultants to their

colleagues. In institutions with campus-wide faculty development or instructional improvement centers, departmental faculty consultation time can be reduced by taking advantage of the many valuable services these centers provide, usually gratis. Such services might include one-on-one consultation, classroom visits, videotaping, course and curriculum design assistance, and help with the introduction of technological innovations into the classroom.

To develop a viable teaching portfolio program, the ultimate investments must be made, of course, by the individual faculty members assembling the teaching portfolios. Seldin and Annis (1990) emphasize, however, that preparing a teaching portfolio takes less time than most faculty assume. Concentrated effort spread out over parts of only a few days can result in a viable, self-tailored document which can then be further shaped over time as teaching improvements occur. As a matter of practicality, teaching portfolios, if they are to be embraced by faculty, must be manageable and cost effective.

2. The departmental focus results in a second reason for the teaching portfolio's viability. It becomes an effective tool for instructional improvement precisely because it is grounded squarely in discipline-related pedagogy—what Shulman (1987, 1989) calls “pedagogical content knowledge.” Edgerton (1989) purports that “teaching is highly context specific, and its true richness can be fully appreciated only by looking at how we teach a particular subject to a particular set of students” (p 15). He suggests that we need a more contextual conception of pedagogy—a rationale for basing the study and practice of teaching on “what is being taught to whom” (Edgerton, 1990, p. xv). Teaching goals, too, are shaped in large part by the different fields of study. Cross (1990) found, after extended experience administering the Teaching Goals Inventory, that:

Teaching goals in the disciplines are visibly and legitimately different. What and how well students learn bears [sic] some relationship, we hope to what teachers think it is important to teach. If teachers from different disciplines have different teaching goals, then a variety of measures must be used to assess teaching effectiveness. Even more important, teachers themselves must be able to assess how well they are accomplishing their own discipline-related goals. (p. 16)

Emphasis and reflection on teaching from a departmental, discipline-specific basis should thus be a powerful force for change. In fact, as Lucus (1990) suggests, “Academic chairs are the key agents for enhancing the quality of undergraduate education and . . . chairs can be most effective when they are supported by academic administrators who are working toward the same goals and who agree on appropriate strategies for improving teaching.”

Teaching, she urges, must become “a valued activity in the department” (p. 65).

3. The teaching portfolio’s third potential impact lies in its ability to counter the superficiality or absence of teaching documentation. “Creative teaching, especially at the undergraduate level,” notes the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1990), “is difficult to identify, infrequently rewarded, and rarely publicized” (p. 35). Unlike documentation of scholarly activities, teaching assessments—if made at all—often rely only on “student evaluations and ‘coffeeroom conversation’” (Watkins, 1990, p. A15). “In the worst case scenario,” Weimer (1990) observes, “hearsay spread among teachers, overheard comments from students, and discrete questions to advisees form the eclectic basis from which conclusions are drawn” (p. 112).

Seldin (1990) points out, however, that many researchers and writers agree that “teaching can be assessed as rigorously as research and publication and has been for years in many institutions” (p. 6). The teaching portfolio, with its rich content emphasizing the products of good teaching, with its reflective commentary and course materials, and with its information and observations from others, can provide solid evidence about the quality of teaching effectiveness.

4. A fourth advantage of a teaching portfolio lies in the faculty member’s involvement in both documentation and reflection. Because faculty have “ownership” of the portfolio process, they are more likely to act positively as a result of their own reflections. Blackburn and Pitney (1988) conclude after a substantive review of major theories that despite the “voluminous” literature, “there is no universally effective way of motivating individuals” (p. 7). McKeachie (1979) postulates, however, that faculty are intrinsically motivated individuals, an assumption shared by Cross (1990): “The research suggests that college faculty members are more likely than people who have chosen other careers to respond to intrinsic motivators” (p. 17). Such motivators might include the intellectual challenge of preparing a synthesizing lecture or the satisfaction of seeing students in cooperative small groups “discovering” knowledge and gaining insights from one another. Cross emphasizes:

Research into the characteristics of college faculty show them to be achievement oriented, intellectually curious, and autonomous. I therefore assume that most teachers want to be really good teachers, that they enjoy the intellectual challenge of discovering how to teach for maximum effect, and that they are self-motivated and self-renewing once started on the path of



addressing a challenge to their intellectual curiosity and love of problem solving. (p. 17)

5. The final advantage of using teaching portfolios lies in the value of the consultation process itself. Seldin (Watkins, 1990) notes: "Good portfolios are collegial efforts. Few people can work alone and do a portfolio. You need help from some 'other'—it might be a department chairman or a faculty member or a teaching improvement specialist—to structure the portfolio and to decide what goes in it" (p. A15). Edgerton (1991) also considers this an important finding: "Portfolios can and probably should be designed in *collaboration* with a colleague" (p. 9).

The value of one-on-one consultation for improving teaching effectiveness has been well documented in the literature (Brinko, 1990; Erickson & Erickson, 1979; Katz & Henry, 1988; Menges & Brinko, 1986; Mortensen, 1982; Stevens & Aleamoni, 1985; Wilson, 1986). As Erickson and Erickson (1979) note: "Instructors who go through the teaching consultation procedure make qualitative changes in their teaching skill performance which are evident to students in subsequent courses. . . . The results also indicate that the improvements in their teaching skill performance are relatively long-lived" (p. 682).

Change is likely to occur as a result of consultation when the suggested teaching modifications are specific. Wilson (1986) cautions that "the more behavioral, specific, or concrete a suggestion is, the more likely it is that it will affect students' perceptions of his or her teaching" (p. 206). Carroll and Goldberg (1985) also emphasize "the critical importance of explicit goal setting and focused feedback for changing instructors' teaching behavior" (p. 451).

Peer classroom observations, because they reflect a "situated act" involving students, faculty member(s), specific content, and learning activities in a classroom environment, are one of the most effective ways to engender dialogues about teaching. Such visitations should be considered by any faculty member contemplating a teaching portfolio that will concretely document classroom interactions and effectiveness. Those expressing reservations about the process and validity of classroom observations (Bergman, 1980; Centra, 1976, 1979; Doyle, 1983; French-Lazovik, 1981; and Weimer, Kerns, & Parrett, 1988) tend to emphasize the pitfalls of poorly conceived or conducted observations used for summative evaluations. Successful programs such as the Peer Visit Program at the University of Maryland University College (Millis, 1989), emphasize collegiality and the expectation of positive change. Trained, experienced faculty, who are noted for their teaching ability and interpersonal skills, conduct the 80-125 peer visits that occur each semester. Through a Teaching Action Plan (See Appendix B), the

visitors help faculty members, often adjuncts new to the institution, but rarely new to teaching, identify specific ways to improve their teaching.

The likelihood of positive change increases when (a) mutual trust and respect exists between the two parties in consultation; and (b) the feedback on teaching is concrete and specific. Trust can develop if the consultation occurs in a context of the “colleague as helper” (Weimer, 1990). Wilkerson (1988) notes:

A collaborative approach recognizes the professional status of both the teacher and the observer. It can help reduce the threat perceived by the teacher in being observed, lessen the impact of observer bias, and enhance the skills of the teacher in accurately assessing and improving his or her own teaching. Collaborative observation is characterized by the use of a pre-observation conference, descriptive observation notes, and teacher direction of the post-observation conference. (p. 96)

Weimer (1990) recommends several ways to ensure that classroom visits encourage the collegiality needed for viable growth and change. Observations should be reciprocal, she suggests, making them a shared responsibility. Furthermore, the faculty members do not necessarily have to be in the same discipline. When the pairs are from different departments, there is less anxiety, more confidentiality, and a greater emphasis on viewing instruction from a student perspective (p. 119). Observations should not be a one-time, hit-or-miss proposition. To be effective and fair, they must be ongoing occurrences (p. 122).

Faculty themselves feel positive about instructional consultation with colleagues, as reported by Centra (1976), Blackburn, Pellino, Boberg, & O’Connell, (1980); Boice & Turner (1989), and Millis (1989). Menges (1987) notes:

Effectiveness of colleagues as consultants in the teaching improvement process has yet to be validated against criteria of student learning. As far as faculty participants are concerned, however, findings are clear: participants report high satisfaction, more interaction with other faculty members, increased motivation, and renewed interest in teaching. (p. 91)

This mentoring process has benefits for both the person visited and the visitor, as noted by Holmes (1988). Edgerton (1988) characterizes such exchanges as “collegial dialogue” and suggests that “we must move to a culture in which peer review of teaching is as common as peer review of research . . . a culture in which professors ask their colleagues for comment

on the syllabus of a course as routinely as they ask for comment on the prospectus of a book” (p. 8).

## The Teaching Portfolio and the New Scholarship

Many educators, including Boyer (1987), have deplored the imbalance between research and teaching. Few have been more vocal than Eble (1990):

The impact of the research fetish on undergraduate education has been ruinous. It is largely responsible for the incoherence of the curriculum as well as for its unwholesome and unattractive aspects. It is directly responsible for narrowing the conception of both teaching and learning and of debasing the general worth of both. It is directly responsible for distorting the academic reward system so that the necessary diversity of higher education—of which maintaining strong undergraduate education is a foremost concern—is badly served. And it has trivialized much learning, deadened a great deal of instruction, and distorted our conceptions of what is to be learned and how one might go about it. Among its other adverse consequences are the immense waste of young brain power and the human and economic burden of publishing and accumulating and storing information. (p. 16)

Schaefer (1990) has similarly charged that the “publication of scholarly drivel” is “an obsession that has diminished the classroom experience and has cheated generations of unsuspecting students” (p. xii).

Cheney (1990), chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, notes that this emphasis on research has affected the public schools as well:

Among today’s college students are tomorrow’s teachers; and if their curricula have been haphazard, they may well know less than they should about the subjects they will teach. If they have been taught in an indifferent fashion, they will be less likely to know how to teach well themselves. (p. 34)

Recently there has been a strong movement toward an enlarged view of scholarship, which Rice (1990) finds “congruent with the rich diversity that is the hallmark of American higher education; one that is more appropriate, more authentic, and more adaptive for both our institutions and the day-to-day working lives of our faculty” (p. 1).

The recent publication of the Carnegie Foundation’s special report, authored by Boyer (1990), *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*, promises to help create a redefinition of what it means to be a

scholar. Yanikoski, Associate Vice-President for Academic Affairs at DePaul University, comments: "The Carnegie sponsorship can lend an air of acceptability to the public discussion of this issue in a way that one institution or one academic leader would find awkward" (Leatherman, 1990, p. A16).

Boyer calls for four general views of scholarship—discovery, integration, application, and teaching. The scholarship of teaching emphasizes content knowledge, pedagogical procedures to "build bridges between the teacher's understanding and the students' learning" and to "create a common ground of intellectual commitment, and a communal approach that involves the teacher as a learner as well, one who can transfer and extend knowledge" (pp. 23-24).

Boyer reminds us, however, that ideas alone are not sufficient and that teaching must be vigorously assessed, using universally recognized and respected criteria. Evidence should come at the very least from peers, from students, and from self-assessment. The activities and documentation Boyer describes echo exactly the "selection" and "reflection"—evidence supported by explanatory, exploratory statements—advocated for a teaching portfolio. In fact, he states directly: "When it comes to pulling all the evidence together, we are impressed by the portfolio idea—a procedure that encourages faculty to document their work in a variety of ways" (p. 40).

## Conclusion

The teaching portfolio is an idea whose time has come. Many institutions, such as the University of Missouri and the University of Maryland College Park, have endorsed its use, and the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development has initiated a clearing house and network on teaching portfolios. Portfolios can help teachers and administrators shift priorities to better serve students, the community, and the nation. As Botstein (1990) reminds us: "The 'bottom line' is never bureaucratic or fiscal. It is what is learned, created, and discovered by faculty and students" (p. 40). The teaching portfolio ensures that we capture the essence of these experiences.

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# Appendix A

## *Items That Might Be Included in a Teaching Dossier*

### **Roles, Responsibilities, and Goals:**

- A statement of teaching roles and responsibilities
- A reflective statement of teaching goals and approaches
- A list of courses taught, with enrollments and comments as to if new, team-taught, etc.
- Number of advisees, grad and undergrad

### **Contributions to Institution or Profession:**

- Service on teaching committees
- Development of student apprentice programs
- Assistance to colleagues on teaching
- Review of texts, etc.
- Publications in teaching journals
- Work on curriculum revision or development
- Obtaining funds/equipment for teaching labs, programs
- Provision of training in teaching for graduate students

### **Activities to Improve Instruction:**

- Participation in seminars or professional meetings on teaching
- Design of new courses
- Design of interdisciplinary or collaborative courses or teaching projects
- Use of new methods of teaching, assessing learning, grading
- Preparation of a textbook, courseware, etc.
- Description of instructional improvement projects developed or carried out.

### **Honors or Recognitions:**

- Teaching awards from department, school
- Teaching awards from profession
- Invitations based on teaching reputation to consult, give workshops, write articles, etc.
- Requests for advice on teaching by committees or other organized groups

### **Representative Course Materials:**

- Syllabuses
- Course descriptions with details of content, objectives, methods, and procedures for evaluating student learning
- Reading lists
- Assignments
- Exams and quizzes, graded and ungraded
- Handouts, problem sets, lecture outlines
- Descriptions and examples of visual materials used
- Descriptions of uses of computer or other technology in teaching.

*(Continued on next page.)*

**Materials Showing Extent of Student Learning:**

- \_\_\_ Scores on standardized or other tests, before and after instruction
- \_\_\_ Students' lab books, or other workbooks
- \_\_\_ Students' papers, essays or creative works
- \_\_\_ Graded work from the best and poorest students with teacher's feedback to students
- \_\_\_ Instructor's written feedback on student work

**Evaluations of Teaching:**

- \_\_\_ Summarized student evaluations of teaching, including response rate and students' written comments and overall ratings.
- \_\_\_ Results of students' exit interviews
- \_\_\_ Letters from students, preferably unsolicited
- \_\_\_ Comments from a peer observer or colleague teaching the same course
- \_\_\_ Letter from division head or chairperson

**Miscellaneous Sources on Teaching Effectiveness:**

- \_\_\_ Comments from students' parents or employers
- \_\_\_ Statements from colleagues in the department or elsewhere, re: preparation of students for advanced work

# Teaching Action Plan

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_  
 DATE: \_\_\_\_\_  
 COURSE: \_\_\_\_\_  
 SECTION NO: \_\_\_\_\_

Area of Change	Suggested Change	Change will occur in following semester	Timetable, if Applicable	Record of Action
Cooperation  Active Learning  Respects Diversity  Other				