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Improving Performance Through Strategic Teaching Documentation: The Continued Importance of Seldin, Miller & Seldin's *The Teaching Portfolio* in the Face of a New Reality

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Abstract

Book Review of Seldin, P., Miller, J. E., & Seldin, C. A. (2010) *The teaching portfolio: A practical guide to improved performance and promotion/tenure decisions*. John Wiley & Sons.

416 pages. Available in hardback, paperback, and digital format

Keywords: teaching, teaching documentation, teaching portfolio, tenure, promotion

Academics striving towards tenure and promotion are often tasked with strategically documenting their performance in the specific areas indicated in their dedicated role statements, including research, service, and teaching. However, during the last 18 months, faculty have faced many new challenges in light of a new teaching reality driven by the restrictions and amendments required to adjust to a COVID-safe teaching environment. Characterized by many pedagogical discoveries, pivots, and adaptations, this unprecedented upheaval to higher education challenged faculty not only to remain flexible and innovative but also to identify new ways in which teaching success could be achieved through various delivery formats including live streaming, asynchronous online, and hybrid formats. As higher education has evolved to a new reality for many, this poses the question of how faculty can continue to improve performance through strategic teaching documentation in the face of a new reality.

Indeed, with regard to documenting teaching excellence, classic literature on the components of strategic teaching documentation continues to play an essential role in helping faculty refocus and develop a blended skillset of past knowledge and present learnings. A practical guide leading towards a successful approach to documenting one's teaching philosophy and the resulting process of continuous improvement in teaching performance and classroom excellence over various semesters is now more crucial than ever.

Research has shown that the use of teaching portfolios stimulated academics to reflect on their classroom performance, learning content, and instructional methods (Rijdt et al., 2006). Guidance and ideas towards documenting classroom progress and success may be especially helpful to junior faculty building their portfolio but may also serve as a desired benchmark to senior faculty wishing to revise and improve their own teaching portfolio or judging others while serving on committees. It is this guidance that the essential text of Seldin, Miller, and Seldin (2010) *The Teaching Portfolio: A Practical Guide to Improved Performance and Promotion/Tenure Decisions* provides. While the book's title suggests a strong focus on teaching documentation, faculty may particularly benefit from the guide's framework and strategic suggestions in order to document their pedagogical discoveries and adaptations over the last 18 months, which are equally transferrable to the documentation efforts of both research and service portfolios.

The background and qualification of the three distinguished editors of the book mirror its applicability across a wide range of disciplines and areas of expertise. Particularly, Distinguished Professor of Management Emeritus at Pace University P. Seldin draws on consultancy experience with over 350 institutions of higher education across the world. Miller, Associate Professor of Family and Child Studies, has developed an original training program for teaching assistants at Northern Illinois University, and C. A. Seldin, Professor of Education at the University of Massachusetts, draws on practical experience mentoring faculty in the process of preparing their tenure and promotion portfolios (Seldin et al., 2010).

Based on their extensive experience as mentors, researchers, and practitioners in the field of teaching portfolio development, the three editors invited contributions from a wide range of authors and disciplines, including chemistry and mathematics, communication, justice studies, music, nursing, social and behavioral science and theater, representing one of the book's notable strengths.

A shortcoming for readers may first be the fact that the book strongly focuses on providing "hands-on" and "ready-to-use" information but misses out on presenting a strong theory-driven visual framework that captures the essence of the suggestions and addresses different learning types. Second, the book includes a list of survey rating questions that could be employed for teaching portfolio evaluation, including giving advice to colleagues or serving on committees (Centra, 2000). However, the book lacks quantitative analysis of the reliability

and validity of the rating scales suggested for assessment. This is problematic considering a general paucity of research on the effectiveness and replicability of colleague or administrator evaluations in higher education (Centra, 2000), particularly considering the confusion between formative and summative portfolios (Bunker & Leggett, 2004) and the need to evaluate information on both qualitative and quantitative dimensions (Trigwell, 2001).

In its first part, the book sets expectations with a foreword by W. J. McKeachie and a preface to the fourth edition, reflecting on changes in college teaching over the course of the previous decades and discussing some of the current book's highlights, such as models of successful use and a field-tested templates. Further, providing additional background information on the authors and the twenty-seven contributors from multiple disciplines emphasizes once again the teaching portfolio's usability across disciplines.

Following the preface and introductions, part one of the book discusses the general importance and relevance of teaching portfolios, as well as the contents suggested to be included in a portfolio, aiming to answer the "what, why, and how" of teaching portfolios. Specifically, Part 1 outlines important practical steps faculty may follow in order to successfully start the process of developing their own teaching portfolio. The authors include guidance on selection of the right materials for portfolio documentation, structuring their suggestions into material from oneself, material from others, products of good teaching and student learning, and the appendices. Further, hands-on examples such as checklists and a detailed example of a table of contents aim to help faculty evaluate their portfolio choices. Additionally, the tips outlined for faculty who wish to further improve and evaluate their existing portfolio, which the authors suggest doing on a yearly basis (p.40), and a frequently asked questions section serve as a helpful guide not only for the submitters but also for committee members tasked with evaluating their peer's portfolios.

Following those practical steps, Part 2 draws on reports from four US institutions in order to illustrate how teaching portfolios are used in practice. The authors suggest the main areas of use include "teaching improvement, tenure and promotion, and preparing new professors to teach" (p.79). The four selected examples may prove helpful for faculty to understand the wide-ranging importance and impacts of teaching portfolios beyond being perceived as an extra administrative inconvenience (De Jijdt et al., 2006), such as their own hiring and tenure and promotion process as well as the implications beyond their own professional development. Further, Part 2 may be particularly relevant to faculty serving on committees and administrative positions at institutions of higher education tasked with developing workshops or institutes.

Finally, Part 3 of the book presents twenty-one sample portfolios from contributors across disciplines. While readers may be able to identify at least one example closely related to their

own discipline, the authors emphasize the need for cautious reading and application of these examples to one's own reporting as each portfolio represents an individual approach with varying importance judgments and emphasis. It is suggested that readers utilize examples from outside their own discipline as "helpful information," prompting faculty to think outside the box and strategically develop a high-level understanding of the relevance of teaching portfolios across departments and disciplines, which may prove valuable to central committee members exposed to a variety of portfolios across disciplines.

In all, *The Teaching Portfolio: A Practical Guide to Improved Performance and Promotion/Tenure Decisions* serves as an essential text and valuable guide of immediate usefulness for faculty and administrators irrespective of their levels of experience and disciplines. As M. L. Wharton, Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs and Diversity at Loyola University, expresses, the book helps all individuals to "really understand the quality and value of individual teaching contributions" (Seldin et al., 2010). The book further contributes to our understanding of the importance teaching portfolios have held in the past and will continue to hold when integrating present learnings to help shape institutional improvement (Buckridge, 2008). The provision of an essential framework may be a helpful guidance in workshops and learning circles for faculty and administrators in higher education and can be applied to their latest discoveries through various delivery formats, including live streaming, asynchronous online, and hybrid formats.

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