YOUR TEACHING PORTFOLIO: 
STRATEGIES FOR INITIATING AND DOCUMENTING GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

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An introduction to the concept of the teaching portfolio, this article provides several short- and long-term strategies related to documenting teaching-development efforts. In particular, it provides a persuasive rationale for why one should consider dedicating precious time and resources documenting teaching goals and development and how the activity itself can make one a better instructor.

Keywords: teaching portfolio; new faculty; graduate students; teacher development; career growth

Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique: good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.

Palmer (1997, p. 16)

In many programs, graduate students receive comprehensive feedback on their research interests through the ongoing supervision and mentorship provided by faculty members. Doctoral-level students often leave graduate school with a clear understanding of their research and writing interests and strengths. However, it is still rare for graduate students to similarly experience consistent mentorship around the development of their teaching skills and how to document their teaching-development efforts over time. In many cases, if students have had the opportunity to teach during their time in graduate school, the experience is often seen as a secondary commitment.

There has lately been an explosion of research interest on the attributes of successful new faculty (Boice, 1992). What we are learning from these efforts...
is that although disciplinary expertise is crucial, it’s not sufficient. Successful junior faculty must also figure out how to efficiently balance their time and direct their energies across the three domains of faculty assessment: research, teaching, and service. More and more evidence suggests that successful junior faculty are those who find ways to quickly and efficiently harness their teaching and research responsibilities. One way to promote success is to identify and then direct efforts in ways that return the highest reward.

In this article, I shall cover an introduction to the concept of a teaching portfolio and several short- and long-term strategies related to documenting teaching-development efforts. I hope to provide you with a persuasive rationale for why you should consider dedicating precious time and resources documenting your teaching goals and development and how I think such practices can make you a better teacher (first and foremost) and a more competitive candidate for a range of positions. These concepts can be useful both to graduate students who are seeking positions as faculty members and to all faculty for recording and documenting efforts for other applications.

Why Develop a Teaching Portfolio?

There are a number of reasons to consider gathering materials and framing them as a teaching portfolio. For example, a portfolio might be useful as a developmental tool to stimulate individual reflection and personal development, or it can be used as a demonstration of accomplishments (e.g., to supplement other job search documentation, to offer evidence to the judges of local or national awards, to offer as support for tenure and promotion decisions). More and more often, job announcements request candidates to submit a teaching statement with the more traditional documents of a cover letter, curriculum vitae, and references.

Let’s begin with the developmental or formative uses of a teaching portfolio. By formative I mean those uses that are low stakes and developmental in nature. Seldin (2004) says that self-evaluation can reap great returns, not the least of which is helping you to reflect and assess your strengths and challenges. He suggests that they can help you,

- Begin to articulate and explore your attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs about excellence in teaching
- Draft ideas useful for framing a statement of philosophy to share with others (students, colleagues, peers, administration, potential students) regarding your aspirations, values, biases, and beliefs
- Describe your identity as a teacher by gathering materials with a focus or theme for teaching activities and aspirations

The second key outcome portfolios provide is that they help us to demonstrate how we express our priorities in teaching over a range of considerations (i.e., course level, learning goals, students’ levels of readiness, etc.) and
time. Often, instructors find that this articulation of how we implement our learning outcome goals (why we do what we do) encourages and sustains an ongoing cycle of self-reflection and self-assessment that leads to refinements and improvements in practices.

Teaching portfolios are more and more often being considered helpful contributions to a range of summative documentation efforts. Establishing and verifying for others your teaching effectiveness can be a complex task. Many departments and schools rely on one-dimensional instruments such as end-of-course evaluations by students. Although such summative evaluations can provide instructors and personnel helpful information, even more can be gained by incorporating a range of materials and expressions of performance. A portfolio allows the instructor to articulate and then demonstrate for the reader how key values and priorities suffuse course planning, implementation, and assessment.

And finally, a portfolio can help to define the role of teaching in relation to our other professional responsibilities, such as research and service. In a practical vein, many find the pressing reason for composing a teaching portfolio is that you face the open job market at some point in the near future. This is a perfectly valid, practical motivation! When I work with graduate students, I encourage them to think of their teaching portfolio as nested within a set of documentation materials, each one serving a specific and unique purpose. This broad set of materials is composed of (at least) an up-to-date curriculum vitae, a well-crafted cover letter, a statement of research activity and evidence of accomplishments, and, of course, a teaching portfolio. Each element contributes something special and particular in explaining your preparation for and your promise of success in a particular position.

If you go forward in higher education, there will continue to be a range of good reasons to put a teaching portfolio together. Here are some of what I identify as global or universal reasons.

- Portfolios are by their nature organic and changing constantly. Therefore, portfolios readily lend themselves to demonstrating progress and development over time.
- A portfolio is not a research paper. Portfolios are meant to be unique expressions of individual goals, values, and accomplishments. No two are alike.
- Portfolios cannot convey everything there is to say about you as a teacher. The best portfolios convince the readers that it would be an interesting and good use of their time to further talk with you.

**Strategies for Systematically Developing Your Portfolio**

**WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT GOOD TEACHING?**

One of the first steps is to define a standard of excellent teaching. In workshops, we stop at this point for an exercise. I ask participants to recall
a learning experience when the process worked really well. Sadly, it’s quite possible that many have never had a really positive classroom learning experience. For this purpose, the example can be either in or out of a classroom setting. Then I ask them to think back to what the teacher did in that experience and to capture as many attributes of the experience as they can, such as what the teacher did, what they as students did, what others around them contributed, and so on. Participants then form dyads to discuss their experiences. These discussions typically yield many of the same attributes identified by Chickering and Gamson (1987) as the seven principles of good teaching practice, which are based on their own experiences in the college and university classroom. In the list, Chickering and Gamson suggest a set of behaviors that help guide instructors interested in improving their teaching proficiency by indicating what attributes might contribute the most toward creating effective teaching and learning environments. They are,

1. Good practice encourages contacts between students and faculty
2. Good practice develops reciprocity and cooperation among students
3. Good practice uses active learning techniques
4. Good practice gives prompt feedback
5. Good practice emphasizes time on task
6. Good practice communicates high expectations
7. Good practice respects diverse talents and ways of learning

In her work, Sorcinelli (1993, 2006) took the principles of good practice suggested by Chickering and Gamson (1987) a step further by exploring if and how each of these principles is linked to the empirical and practice-based research on effective teaching and learning environments. As a result, Sorcinelli suggested that the research pointed toward “five dimensions of good teaching:”

1. Dynamism/enthusiasm: Enjoys teaching, inspires interest and excitement in the content of the course.
2. Command of subject: Contrasts various points of view, relates subject to current events outside of the classroom, discusses recent developments in the field.
3. Organization/clarity: Provides clear, well-organized presentations; states how performance is to be evaluated; gives prompt, frequent feedback on student progress.
4. Faculty–group interaction: Encourages student involvement in the classroom, invites students to share their knowledge and experiences, and knows if the class understands course material.
5. Faculty–student contact: Shows a genuine interest in students, respects students as persons, is accessible to students in and outside of class, is sensitive to the differences that students bring to the classroom.

How do we find out if our efforts in the classroom align with these dimensions, and, perhaps even more important, how do we demonstrate this alignment?
By their very nature, teaching portfolios are intended to be a concise overview. This requires you to judiciously choose your points and materials. In keeping with that effort, it enormously helps if your materials act in concert with each other to reiterate selected priorities. One way to do this is by developing a unifying theme or motif from which you can focus multiple illustrations of how you design, implement, and assess the outcomes related to these goals. Themes may likely directly come from your research interests or recent courses taught. Ideally, you would be able to show how you have successfully communicated these themes by having mention of them in the course evaluations and recommendation letters. This internal integrity within the portfolio helps the readers understand your key points and priorities, even in the context of a quick reading. It also prepares scholars going on the job market for the first time to be able to succinctly explain their unique interests, attributes, and effectiveness during job interviews.

Some questions useful to think about as you begin to develop your portfolio are these:

- What are you trying to achieve as a teacher (i.e., your key objectives, goals, values)?
- What do you expect your students to gain from your courses in terms of content knowledge, skills, and appreciations?
- Why do you make the choices you do about content priorities, pedagogical methods, and student learning strategies?

WHAT’S IN A PORTFOLIO?

What goes into your portfolio is driven by how you intend to use it, your past experiences, and your future aspirations. The flexible nature of a portfolio allows it to both demonstrate past performance and demarcate future goals. Because of this encompassing nature, portfolios deliberately combine a variety of sources of information (e.g., personal reflection, course-based materials, and formal and informal assessment materials from students, peers, and supervisors). To help define the scope and breadth of your materials, Carolyn Lieberg (2004), of the University of Iowa suggests that you begin by considering,

- Goals and objectives that you have set for yourself as a teacher and your expectations and goals for your students.
- The range of experiences you have had to date and the kinds of evidence produced from these experiences—course designs, examples of students’ assignments and other work, course evaluations, peer observations, and instructional materials you’ve developed. Don’t forget to consider video, CD-ROM, and Web-based materials.
- Expressions of core course design activity such as syllabi, tests, assignments, exercises, projects, modules, labs, demonstrations, and feedback processes.
BUT I’VE NEVER TAUGHT MY OWN CLASS

My comments so far seem to imply that to develop a teaching portfolio you must have already had a great deal of teaching experience. Although it certainly helps, you don’t necessarily have to have had any particular level of experience. If you have not had teaching experiences yet (and many graduating PhD students have not), then your option is to create an aspirational portfolio. In this case, collect resources and materials that you deem likely to be useful in the future when you do teach in the context of your discipline and then tell the reader how and why you have made these selections. For example, I suggest that you talk to other instructors you admire about their approach to teaching. This may even be the person you identified in our earlier exercise. Often, such a dialogue can stimulate your own reflective process and help you to better articulate your priorities, goals, and values. Many senior instructors are very generous in sharing their syllabi, course assignments, and assessment tools with junior colleagues. On my campus, I also urge graduate students to seek out opportunities to guest lecture for faculty members when there are connections to their emergent research interests and fields of expertise.

Even if you are not the teacher of record for your own courses, seek out different kinds of opportunities to support your teaching development and be on the lookout for opportunities that will help you to document your efforts to broadly think about best practices in teaching. For example, there may be opportunities to attend a discipline-based pedagogy seminar, professional-development workshops, or other such events both on your campus and within the field. In addition, many disciplinary organizations now have standing committees dedicated to teaching improvement. These groups often sponsor teaching-development opportunities within the context of regional and national meetings, such as the Organizational Behavior Teaching Conference. Before you begin, you may also want to consult various Web sites detailing the requirements and forms of successful teaching portfolios. Some helpful sites include the following:

- Creating a Teaching Portfolio—Online Information and Resources (https://www.tltc.ttu.edu/teach/teachingportfolio.asp; Texas Tech University, Teaching Learning and Technology Center, 2007)
- Developing a Teaching Portfolio (http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/PortfolioTools.htm; University of Washington, Center for Instructional Development and Research, n.d.)
- Developing a Teaching Portfolio (http://ftad.osu.edu/portfolio/; The Ohio State University, 2005)
- Preparing a Teaching Portfolio (http://www.utexas.edu/academic/cte/teachfolio.html; University of Texas at Austin, Center for Teaching Effectiveness, n.d.)
- The Teaching Portfolio at Washington State University (http://www.wsu.edu/provost/teaching.htm; Washington State University, Office of the Provost, 1996)
The Key Element: Your Teaching Philosophy

A point at which to begin is to draft a statement of your teaching philosophy. This statement is an opportunity to explore some of your own attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs about teaching. Your teaching philosophy also helps the reader to know more about your principle beliefs about how students learn best in the context of your discipline and helps to signal the beliefs and attitudes that ultimately create the foundation for course design.

To give you a good starting place, I share the following two exercises, which I often use in portfolio workshops.

1. When you think about excellence in teaching, what three words come to mind? This exercise is called the “three words exercise.” What’s most important is to not overthink. Try to be spontaneous and write down whatever comes to mind without stopping to organize, edit, or refine. Keep going if you can generate more than three. Next, go back to each of the three and try to fill them out with additional words related to the central idea. Take these clusters of words and then frame each one into a full sentence, building toward a paragraph. Describe the words. Situate them. Explain your relationship to them. Meaningful information about your philosophy will eventually evolve from whatever you originally put on the page. (Elbow, 1973). The trick is to get started. Once you have drafted a couple of paragraphs, stop and consider whether you can recall an incident or teaching-related experience that illustrates your point. We all have had the experience of how much a good anecdote or example can help sustain our interest and help us remember key points. This is true in your teaching portfolio, too; readers will better understand what you are trying to say, and they will be motivated to talk at greater length with the person who wrote it.

2. Take 5 minutes to write your thoughts about what you know so far about what is most important in teaching management to undergraduate students. Ultimately, from this exercise you should be able to answer the question What do you expect your students to gain from your course? The first exercise should help with this one.

When you arrive at a draft of your teaching philosophy with which you feel comfortable, choose a range of readers to give you feedback. I suggest you ask one or two peers, faculty members within the discipline, a few students (if possible), and perhaps one or two outside readers as well. Feedback from such readers can help you determine whether or not your statement sounds like you, that is, effectively communicates your values and invites further dialogue with you about teaching.

As tempting as it may be to do so, I generally don’t recommend that you read many other statements until you have a working draft of your own.
Primarily, this advice stems from my confidence in your ability to say something interesting about your teaching without relying on the experiences or priorities of others. In addition, reading statements that have already benefited from ongoing editing and refining may make the process of writing your own statement feel unnecessarily daunting.

Writing that is both good and brief takes time and effort, so get started on your statement right away. Once you have a draft with which you’re comfortable, then by all means explore statements written by others in your discipline as examples. If your campus does not yet support a teaching-development center, consider going online. A Web-based search often yields an array of easily accessible teaching statements.

Putting It All Together: Collecting Materials

In addition to the statement of philosophy, it is useful to include a set of materials that act as evidence of your ongoing teaching-development activities. One useful guideline for selecting these materials is to assemble a set of examples that cohere and illuminate the values you express in your teaching statement. Such materials can describe what you have done and explain why but also suggest what you hope to do in the future.

Your selections should indicate what you are trying to achieve as a teacher (i.e., your learning objectives related to core content, skills you expect students to demonstrate, and values you want students to appreciate). In addition, materials may explain why you make the choices you do about certain teaching methods and strategies related to the needs of students you are teaching and what you expect your students to gain from the course. If you utilize particular approaches to how you structure student-to-student contact (i.e., usage of one-time peer learning groups or ongoing collaborative learning), then examples of such assignments would be important to include.

Selected examples of what you have done and evidence of effective teaching might include

- Personal statement and chronology of teaching-related responsibilities
- A brief explanation of the specific context in which you taught and the program or department’s expectations of you (e.g., Did your course fulfill certain requirements—general education, required for majors?)
- Class size and attributes
- Course syllabi
- Assignments
- Grading rubrics and assessment methods
- Laboratory protocols

I advise my graduate students to include, to the degree possible, information on how they assess and respond to student feedback about the course.
Generally, this includes two key sources of information: formative and summative. Formative assessment methods include those that take place over the duration of the course, generally take only a small amount of time, and are for the development and growth of the instructor (e.g., classroom assessment techniques such as brief responses to open-ended questions, midsemester evaluations, small-group instructional diagnosis, and peer observations; Angelo & Cross, 1993). Summative assessment techniques refer to those methods that are about the overall evaluation of the teaching of the course. These tend to be administered at the very end of the course and are often used in personnel decision-making processes. They are often standardized within the college or school but can also be instruments that you have developed that are unique to your courses.

Regardless of how much student data you have, it is best to consider including visual representations that provide the reader quick insight into broad themes that have emerged from both your formative and your summative assessments of students’ responses to your teaching. Perhaps even more important, help the reader understand what inferences, changes, and innovations have come from such feedback. In other words, what have you learned? What do you intend to change? In what ways? Why?

Reflection on how you take feedback from students into account in how you plan and implement your teaching goals can offer a rich source of illumination for the reader and can show evidence of how you achieved (or worked toward) values and goals described above.

- Samples of student papers or exams with your comments
- Student evaluations
- Letters from peers or faculty who have conducted classroom observations of you teaching
- Unsolicited student letters

Finally, cover important component pieces of your portfolio with a brief paragraph telling the reader why you think this is an important indicator of your teaching commitment and how the individual elements relate back to your philosophy and values. The importance of this is in not leaving the interpretation of your materials to the reader alone. This is especially true of institution-specific information, such as scales used in student evaluation forms.

**Getting Started Now**

The first place to begin in assembling the components of your portfolio is to gather materials already close at hand. Use this as an opportunity to practice thinking about how you will talk about your teaching experiences and your aspirations.
Write down your teaching-development goals and objectives. If you eventually want a position with teaching-related responsibilities, such as a faculty position, what opportunities can you identify that are available to you now that might support those future goals?

Collect materials you already have that will reflect efforts across the core tasks of teaching: course design, planning and preparing, teaching the course, assessing student learning and giving feedback, and providing evidence of your teaching-development efforts. Fill your files with materials, examples, notes, and related artifacts that you think may eventually be useful in a portfolio. At this stage, more is better, so try not to edit! For each course, keep the following:

- Copy of syllabi
- Name of course
- Brief description of the context in which the course was taught (program, department, condensed term, etc.)
- Institution or school where course was offered
- Type and level of the course
- Dates that it was offered
- Class size
- Assignments and readings given to students
- Methods of grading and evaluation
- Description of your role
- Bibliography used in course content preparation

Establish a designated filing system to collect and store materials related to your teaching-development efforts. Treat these files as a separate priority from your normal course records. In the short run, this may mean multiple sets of materials, but in the long run it cuts down on cannibalizing, keeps portfolio materials easily accessible when needed, and provides a clearer overall perspective on your efforts and growth.

Get in the habit of making 5 to 10 extra copies of course-related materials so that you don’t have to go back and reconstruct your examples.

Look for opportunities for formative structured feedback (classroom assessment tools, consultations with faculty or peers, students, etc.) and ask for letters from both peers and faculty observations while the experience is still fresh in their minds. This allows the letters to be more specific.

Organize student evaluations and other forms of summative evaluation materials of your courses so that you begin to look for themes at the aggregate level. The goal is to help show the reader patterns over time.

Ask permission from students to save samples of their work (e.g., papers or exams) with your comments and/or grading notations for later use in your portfolio as demonstrations of how you provided feedback.

For those who have not had much teaching experience, here is a brief writing exercise that can get you going on this section of your portfolio. Ask yourself, What do I do well as a teacher, and how do I know this is so? Write detailed answers that will help guide your material-gathering efforts.
If you have not yet had many opportunities to teach, try these approaches:

- Compose a description of your strategies for using structured feedback to enhance learning or a statement of your philosophy of grading.
- Participate in teaching-development activities, such as dialogues, workshops, courses, or conferences, that strengthen your teaching development. These merit mention in a portfolio.
- Consider keeping a journal in which you write down anecdotes from your teaching and learning experiences that you think will inform your actions as a teacher—those moments when you recognize either something really good or really bad happening within the teaching and learning environment.

**Conclusion: Innovations in Teaching Portfolios**

Teaching portfolios can have a range of applications useful to teachers in college and university environments. As you develop and refine your portfolio, there are some words of advice I’d offer for your consideration: Take risks, be brief, be consistent, and consider how to maximize the results of your efforts.

Your portfolio is unlike any other writing you may do. It is not a research paper, and it should absolutely be written from a first-person point of view. The components of your portfolio will necessarily then also be highly tailored to your own perspective on what’s most important in teaching. This can be very unnerving when you’re simultaneously still knee-deep in proving your expertise in your discipline. This is where it can feel risky but also has the potential to be most genuine and engaging.

Portfolios are often read under less-than-ideal conditions. Readers may be busy members of a selection committee or other personnel-related processes. Very often the reading of portfolios falls into the midst of other committee-based efforts, so readers may be distracted when trying to make sense of your materials. Therefore, it’s essential to focus on your top priorities and to help the reader to see how they are manifested in the evidence of your teaching-development efforts.

Portfolios are most effective if they show patterns over time while addressing the specific goals at hand. The beauty of portfolios is that you can easily adapt them by simply adding and removing materials as fresh data emerge, as you create exciting new materials, and as your values and priorities evolve. Often, materials that provide evidence gathered over the context of several semesters or years is more persuasive. This requires regularly revisiting and updating your materials. Consider an annual review in the same way you update your curriculum vitae and research and service records.

I like to use the metaphor of aerodynamism in talking about teaching portfolios. In this use, I mean aerodynamism to refer to a kind of architectural integrity of the document in which each piece in the portfolio acts to extend and enhance the central motifs of your philosophy statement. An aerodynamic
portfolio displays an integrity and clarity of goals and purposes, which not only improves the messages in your portfolio but also prepares you to anticipate and respond to student-learning concerns and organizes you for future career concerns. Remember, although there are immediate uses (i.e., job applications), there are longer term uses as well (i.e., pretenure and posttenure reviews). Efforts to organize your thinking and to begin gathering evidence of your efforts now help you to practice behaviors (and organizational skills) that will be important throughout a faculty career. Portfolios can address small, incremental goals such as annual faculty reviews, and also metavalues and beliefs about teaching. This increased clarity about teaching and learning goals will also streamline assessment and evaluation processes of student performance.

Whatever your approach, just remember that the best portfolios are ones that help the reader to feel as if he or she now knows something about your approach to teaching—and what he or she might see inside your classroom as you bring the discipline alive for your students. Piquing the interest of the reader this way will ideally make him or her want to talk to you in person about the creative and passionate ways you bring your discipline alive for students.

References

