



University of Fort Hare
Together in Excellence

Teaching and Learning Centre

A Brief Guide
to the
Development of a Teaching Portfolio

Teaching and Learning Centre

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the need for universities to be able to assure the quality of the teaching and learning experiences they offer to students has become increasingly important as governments, parents and industry begin to question the value for money provided by institutions of higher education competing in a global market place. As this has happened, teaching portfolios have gained popularity as means of documenting good teaching both at institutional and personal levels. The extent to which teaching portfolios have become part of academic life internationally is seen in the requirement of many institutions that a portfolio should be submitted along with a curriculum vitae when application is made for a post. Portfolios are also increasingly being required for other purposes, such as for promotion and tenure purposes, and to provide evidence of scholarship in order to reward teaching excellence.

The value of a teaching portfolio goes beyond the purely instrumental need to document good teaching however, as a portfolio is also particularly valuable in developing individuals as teachers. In spite of their initial reluctance to the idea, many lecturers report the construction of a teaching portfolio as an “empowering” experience because of the way it allows them to reflect on and, importantly, manage their performance in the lecture room.

This short guide is intended to help you begin building a portfolio.

2 WHAT SHOULD A TEACHING PORTFOLIO CONTAIN?

The common sense understanding of a portfolio is that of a file or folder into which one puts ‘best’ work. In order to develop and enhance teaching, however, the portfolio has to function as more than a ‘container’ since it has to provide a means through which lecturers can reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their practice as educators in order to identify the aspects of that practice which need to be developed.

The following elements have been identified as important as facilitating this process of reflection:

- A statement which explains what you teach and how you teach it;
- A statement which explains why you teach in that way (ie your teaching ‘philosophy’);
- A statement of the way others experience your teaching.

2.1 What you teach and how you teach it

There are a number of ways in which this information can be organised. You could present the information by listing the courses you teach and by describing the way you teach those courses. If you teach a number of courses, this method could become quite laboured. An alternative would be to group your teaching responsibilities according to year level or according to whether they are undergraduate or postgraduate. Another method would be to distinguish between practicals, tutorials and lectures, or to use content area of the discipline itself as an organising principle.

Regardless of the way you decide to organise the information, you will need to try to relate the way you teach to what you teach. If, for example, you have described your teaching responsibilities according to academic level, you could think about whether your teaching of undergraduate students differs from your teaching of graduates. In this case, factors which could determine any differences in this teaching would be the sizes of the classes and the experience and knowledge of the discipline which students bring to the learning situation.

In thinking about the way you teach, you will need to try to identify your particular 'style' of teaching. The following questions may be helpful in your thinking about this:

- Do you ever give students questions to discuss in small groups in class?
- Do you prepare handouts?
- Do you use the overhead projector/ blackboard extensively?
- Do you stand behind the lectern while you teach or do you move around the room to interact with the students?
- Do you believe your task is to transmit knowledge or do you believe students have to construct their own understanding of the discipline?
- Do you try to teach the 'whole' student, or just the cognitive, intellectual part of the student?
- Do you give students tasks which they are expected to prepare in advance of the lecture?
- How do you handle students who arrive late, or talk in the lecture room?
- How do you assess students' work?
- What sort of comments do you write on work you mark?

Another way to try to identify the salient characteristics of your teaching would be to imagine how your students would describe the way you teach.

2.2 Why you teach the way you do

Every act of teaching rests upon some sort of implicit theory of learning. If, for example, you regularly divide your class up into small groups for discussion, you presumably do so because you believe this contributes to their learning in some way. Your statement of teaching philosophy tries to uncover or reveal the theories about teaching and learning on which your practice rests.

Describing the theories behind your teaching does not mean you have to rush off and consult educational literature in order to cite the authorities. A teaching portfolio requires you to talk about *your* theories. You may well find at some point, that the things you believe about teaching and learning are, in fact, part of an established theory or theories. Alternatively, you may actually base your teaching on some theoretical or practical 'input' about teaching you have encountered in the course of discussion, reading or attending workshops and conferences. In this case you will be able to cite the source of your beliefs.

This is by no means a requirement, however, and you should feel free to state your beliefs in a way which feels comfortable to you.

The statement of teaching philosophy does not have to be separate from the statement of teaching responsibilities. An attempt to describe what you do leads quite naturally into a description of why you do it – or vice versa.

2.3 How others experience your teaching

The final element of the teaching portfolio narrative is the statement of how others experience your teaching. This is based on the evaluations of your teaching and attempts to justify that what you do in the way of teaching is indeed, 'good'.

In order to evaluate your teaching you need to know which aspects of it you want to evaluate. Beginning the process of building a portfolio by writing (albeit in draft or note form) about what you do and why you do it, allows you to identify those aspects of your teaching which you need to evaluate to provide evidence that they do indeed 'work' and are thus 'good' practice. In many respects evaluation is a form of research into your teaching. By writing your statement of teaching responsibilities and teaching philosophy, you have set up a claim that 'teaching these students in these ways helps them to learn'. As in all forms of research, you now need to try to justify that claim, and, if you cannot do this, modify what you do in some way.

It is often helpful to think of evaluations as trying to take a photograph of your teaching from different perspectives or angles using different lenses. For example, you can try to find out how students perceive your teaching. In order to do this you might decide to use a questionnaire which asks them to respond to a series of statements about your teaching using a scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. In many respects this would be like taking a picture using a wide angled lens. Having taken that picture, you could then 'zoom in' on the things you see in the picture using other evaluation techniques such as free-form responses to questions, or interviews with groups of students.

Another important perspective or lens, is that of your peers, who can observe your teaching or examine your course documentation. Before asking your peers to do this, however, it is important to establish what it is you want their opinion on. If you do not do this, you will end up with a very unfocussed evaluation which will not give you very much information about the things you are trying to examine. You will therefore need to discuss what you do in your teaching or in your course and ask them to give an opinion about whether or not it 'works'.

You can also use the literature as another perspective on what you do. If, for example, you make group work a regular feature of your teaching, you could cite examples of other cases of people using group work from the literature, or back up your claim that group work is an effective way to teach by referring to some of the 'established' theories which underpin its use.

The final perspective is your own. Whenever you elicit an evaluation from peers or from students, you can always ‘talk back’ to that evaluation from your own perspective. Students, for example, might complain that the workload in your course is too heavy. You could ‘talk back’ to that observation by saying, for example, that it is possible to do a lot of the preparation for assignments and other tasks in class.

One very important thing to remember about evaluation is that a negative evaluation is only a problem if it is left unmanaged. In many respects, the portfolio is about trying to uncover the lack of consistency or ‘fit’ between what you do, why you do it, and how others experience what you do. Once the lack of consistency has been uncovered, development can occur. A ‘good’ evaluation is therefore one which succeeds in revealing problems and a ‘good’ portfolio is one which reflects on those problems in order to eliminate them through the adaptation of teaching styles and strategies or further course development.

3 HOW BIG SHOULD A PORTFOLIO BE?

At the beginning of this guide the idea that the portfolio is simply a ‘container’ into which evidence of good teaching is inserted, was challenged. Instead, it was argued that the portfolio should provide a structure for an individual to reflect on the strengths and weakness of his/her teaching. We would suggest that the ‘reflective heart’ of the portfolio, which argues:

 this is what I do and why I do it;

 this is how others experience what I do;

 this is how I have modified/will modify what
 I do or what I believe in the light of how others
 experience my work ...

should be about six to ten pages long. Appendices, which give examples of your work or detailed evaluation data can then be inserted at the end of the portfolio. Ideally, your reader will not need to consult your appendices, since the ‘reflective heart’ should provide sufficient explanation. A portfolio which is simply a container into which a large amount of unmediated, unexplained evidence has been inserted would not achieve the purpose of facilitating the reflection intended to further development. The most significant part of the portfolio, the ‘reflective or narrative heart’, is therefore a relatively slim document.

4 THE PORTFOLIO IS NEVER FINISHED...

The concept of the portfolio as something you can open and close at will is important since, ideally, it is a structure you use to reflect on your teaching on an *on-going basis*. As such the portfolio is never ‘finished’. Reopening a portfolio after some time has elapsed can often result in a ‘Did I really believe that?’ or ‘Did I really do that?’ experience akin to that of looking at old photographs (‘Did I really look like that?’). Reworking the portfolio to reflect your changed views and opinions is not only developmental in itself, since it forces

you to scrutinize those views and opinions, but is also a way of measuring one's own development. As such, building a portfolio can be an enormously rewarding experience.

5 EVALUATING THE STRENGTH OF YOUR PORTFOLIO

You can use the template provided below to evaluate the strength of your portfolio.

The first question in the template relates to the contents of the portfolio, and is intended to check whether or not the elements identified as key to the process of reflection are indeed included.

The second question relates to the process of reflection itself. Ideally there should be alignment or 'fit' between what an educator believes, what he/she does, and how others experience that teaching. A lecturer, for example, may use the overhead projector because of a belief that students need to see key points in written form as this reinforces what is said, and thus helps learning. Students, however, may complain that there is too much information on transparencies and they cannot copy it down. In this case there is clearly a lack of consistency/alignment between what the lecturer does and how the students experience what that lecturer does.

The third question relates to the process of developing practice. In the example above, an obvious way to manage the inconsistency between what the lecturer believes, what that lecturer does, and how others experience what is done, would be to put less information on the transparencies or to supply the students with copies of the transparencies. There might well be other ways of managing the inconsistency, however, and some of those ways might be innovative and original. What is all important, however, is that the inconsistency is managed.

From the above explanation, it will hopefully be seen that a portfolio which simply complies with content requirements is not as strong as a portfolio in which the portfolio builder has tried to achieve 'fit' between the three content elements. Similarly, a portfolio which identifies lack of consistency but does not manage that lack is not as strong as a portfolio in which the lecturer develops ways of managing the challenges which evaluations have revealed.

C O N T E N T	<p>1 Is there a statement of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what the lecturer does (ie a description of courses and methods/approaches used to teach these courses?) • what the lecturer believes 'good teaching' to be (i.e. does the portfolio contain a 'philosophy of teaching'?) • the way others have experienced the lecturer's teaching 9ie is there
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	evidence and a commentary on that evidence?)
P R O C E S S	<p>2 Is there consistency between:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what the lecturer believes • what s/he does • how others experience what s/he does?
D E V E L O P M E N T	<p>3 Is there evidence of development, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If there is inconsistency, has the lecturer reflected on this and shown that s/he has made an effort to manage that inconsistency? • If students have made comments and suggestions, has the lecturer reflected upon them and either provided reasons for not incorporating these into the teaching, or outlined how these will be built into future work? • Is there evidence of innovation?

6. SUPPORT PROVIDED FOR THE BUILDING OF TEACHING PORTFOLIOS

6.1 Consultations and workshops:

Consultants in the Teaching Development Unit offer, on request, individual consultations and departmental workshops, in which the rationale for a developmental model and support with writing teaching philosophy statements are included.

6.2 Provision of formative feedback

The Teaching and Learning Centre will respond to any portfolio submitted for comment. This response is confidential and goes directly to the lecturer who has built the portfolio. The aim of this response is to develop teaching rather than evaluate it. The lecturer concerned can use this response to develop teaching practice and/or the portfolio further.

6.3 Provision of Evaluation instruments

The TLC provides two computer-based instruments for use for evaluation by students. For smaller classes (of fewer than 20-25 students) we suggest an open-ended evaluation, while for larger groups the Evaluation Assistant is recommended. The Evaluation Assistant

(EA) is an on-line data base in which you can create and customise your own evaluations in line with a developmental model for quality assurance. Both instruments can be accessed from the TLC website at <http://www.ufh.ac.za/centres/tlc/Evaluations.htm> . Once you have submitted an electronic copy of your EA questionnaire over the web, it is assigned to a mentor, who will validate the questionnaire, after which hard copies are sent to you through the internal mail. Directions for open-ended evaluations are provided on the website. You will then need to administer the questionnaire to your students. Having done that, you should then return the responses to the TLC who will capture the responses and analyse these for you. A confidential report will then be sent to you.

Other types of evaluations also exist, for both formative and summative uses, different types being suited to different purposes and student numbers. The TLC also assists with peer evaluations when requested, and can provide information on all types of evaluation instruments.

For further support please phone one of the TLC Secretaries:

Alice Campus: 040 602 2240

East London Campus: 043 704 7026

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