

A Guide to the Electronic Teaching Portfolio

Academic Programs in College Teaching

University of New Hampshire
Durham, NH 03824

Introduction

"One roadblock to change has been that it was more difficult to document teaching than to compile evidence for scholarly accomplishments. Teaching portfolios appear to offer a mechanism for providing such documentation." (Christopher K. Knapper, "The Origins of Teaching Portfolios," 1995)

This handbook is offered as a general guide for anyone wanting to organize and develop an electronic teaching portfolio to fulfill the College Teaching Praxis (GRAD 990) requirement for one of the University of New Hampshire programs in college teaching.

We begin with a short description of the teaching portfolio, its purposes and functions. We then go on to discuss some portfolio features that are required specifically for the completion of the Praxis, as well as some other materials you might choose to include. Finally, we include a list of resources that will provide you with further information about teaching portfolios, including examples.

We hope this guide furnishes you with a useful general framework for building a successful portfolio. As you will see in the following pages, a portfolio can be as individual as the person building it.

What is a teaching portfolio and what purpose does it serve?

In most instances, the teaching portfolio is a relatively short collection of materials and artifacts selected to document, summarize, and highlight one's growth, experiences, and strengths as a teacher. While you can certainly provide evidence of teaching experience through such traditional means as the list of classes taught in your *C.V.*, the portfolio presents this information in a fuller, more useful, more compelling manner. Not only can you note *what* you have taught, you can also show *how* you teach and *why* you teach as you do. The portfolio allows teaching and learning to be considered in their appropriate context--a context that varies by field and discipline and/or class size and level. And because teaching is such a creative activity, with no two individuals teaching alike, no two portfolios will look alike. Rather, each one mirrors the attributes and styles of the person who created it.

The term "portfolio" is not used loosely. An effective teaching portfolio is neither a "file cabinet" nor a "highlights film," but rather a thematic collection of materials selected to publicly define

your teaching and to demonstrate the effectiveness of your approaches and the quality of your outcomes. Think of your teaching portfolio as an artist or designer thinks of his or her "book": as a collection of your best work presented systematically and thoughtfully for your own self-improvement and for others to learn about you as a teacher.

What should be included in a teaching portfolio?

As stated earlier, no hard and fast rules govern what you may or may not include. However, we do know that there is a consensus among experts in the field of college teaching as to the professional values and behaviors most directly associated with "best practice" in college teaching. Thus, for those submitting a portfolio as one of the requirements for either the Cognate or M.S.T. in the UNH Program in College Teaching, the portfolio must demonstrate a set of specific competencies which reflect those professional values. These "core competencies," which are outlined and discussed below, will be demonstrated by such items as the following:

- a statement of philosophy of teaching and learning
- description of methods used to assess student learning
- statement of teaching competency
- statement of teaching goals
- course syllabi
- analysis of samples of student work related to course objectives
- analysis of student evaluations

Best practice and core competencies

*"What we have looked for, but not seen, in advice for developing portfolios is advice on how to go about a concurrent process to understand and express what constitutes excellent teaching in the academic unit in a way that reflects actual teaching practice."
(Laurie Richlin, "A Different View on Developing Teaching Portfolios, " 1995)*

The Program in College Teaching at UNH rests upon a foundation of professional values which are directly linked with current scholarship on effective teaching and which inform our curriculum. We consider the following professional values vital to effective teaching and believe they are manifest in the skills of those teachers who are most successful in ensuring student learning:

- * having an understanding of how students learn
- * having a concern for students' intellectual development
- * using research on teaching in one's discipline
- * wanting to work with and learn from colleagues
- * reflecting continually on one's own professional practice
- * being aware of the role of "student culture" in the classroom

The teaching portfolio represents a dual opportunity. It allows you to articulate the beliefs and values you hold about teaching, and to demonstrate your mastery of the competencies that make up your "best practice." While some studies of effective teaching list as many as twenty-seven "competencies required for good teachers" (Smith and Simpson, 1995), we believe a teaching portfolio should be centered around a more focused set of "core competencies."

To this end, your portfolio should provide evidence that in your teaching you can effectively accomplish the following:

1. Articulate appropriate course goals and objectives.

Note: Course goals and objectives should be a) tied to specific learning outcomes consistent with existing scholarship about how students learn; and b) explained clearly to students - perhaps in a syllabus - to allow them to use these goals and objectives to assess their own progress and learning.

2. Organize and design courses with these goals and objectives in mind.

Note: This includes but is not limited to: designing formal assignments and examinations appropriate to the learning goals/outcomes of the course; using multiple approaches to instruction, such as multimedia technologies, computer-based materials, and writing to enhance students' understanding of course material; designing and applying appropriate assessment techniques to insure student learning by getting useful feedback from them.

3. Present material effectively and communicate with students in a variety of settings, including large classes and small groups.

Note: Effective communication with students has two dimensions that can be addressed in the portfolio: stimulating students' interest in and engagement with the course material by making it relevant to their lives; and facilitating students' participation in classroom activities and interactions that evoke their interest and appropriately challenge them.

4. Provide feedback to students to give them clear messages about their performance in ways that will help them improve before the semester is over.

Note: Your portfolio should show that you: a) know how to give students frequent, timely, and constructive feedback; and b) use fair and consistent grading methods, with criteria that are clearly conveyed to students.

5. Incorporate into your teaching the latest scholarship in your field or discipline.

Note: Although you may think this is a given, it should nonetheless be made explicit by means of a reflective statement in which you highlight pertinent aspects of a course syllabus or classroom activities.

Contents

How to best demonstrate these competencies in the portfolio will vary from individual to individual, and from discipline to discipline. What is important is that you consciously set out to do so, both in the selection of materials to include, and in your explanations of why and how those materials were used. Where appropriate, you should try to create hyperlinks between your philosophy and competency statements and the artifacts you use to provide evidence for claims you make in those statements.

The following sample table of contents offers an idea of the kinds of materials you might use to accomplish this end.

- Home Page
- Table of Contents
- Curriculum Vitae
- Statement of Teaching Philosophy
- Statement of Teaching Competency
- Teaching Goals

- Appendix 1--Overview of a course you've taught.
 - Course description
 - Syllabus
 - Rationale for the course
 - Methods used to assess student learning
 - Examples of assignments, examinations, and/or student work
 - Examples of innovative teaching methods used
 - Connection between course design and your philosophy of teaching
 - Your response to student evaluations
 - Your evaluation of the course

- Appendix 2 - Overview of a second course you've taught
(repeat format of Appendix 1)

- Appendix 3 - Teaching-related activities.

What is a statement of teaching philosophy?

As the attached paper by Nancy Chism states, it is a short (1-2 pages), concise and cogent expression of your beliefs, attitudes, and values regarding teaching and learning. Your statement should include commentary on your goals for your students and how you see yourself helping advance those goals. Since much of the actual content of the portfolio will be a logical extension and concrete demonstration of the principles you present in this statement, *keep in mind that what you say here must be supported by materials you choose for inclusion later on*. One expert even advocates writing the statement of philosophy after the materials have been chosen

(Richlin, 1995). However, to keep the search for materials focused it might be best to see the development of the portfolio as a reflexive as well as a reflective process. This means you will probably re-write your philosophy of teaching statement a number of times as you fill in other sections of the portfolio. Just as your statement will help you decide what to include elsewhere, some of those choices will help you rethink and refine how you articulate your approach to teaching. Think of the statement as an abstract to a scholarly article. Writing the abstract first is a way of focusing the main points of the paper, even though you know that after you write the paper you'll have to go back and rewrite the abstract.

The important thing to remember is that your strengths as a teacher are really an expression of your beliefs regarding the teaching profession, most of which can be inferred from the materials you choose to document your classroom approaches. This part of the portfolio forces you to make those values explicit--to yourself as well as to others.

Given that the portfolio's implied "thesis" is that "I am an effective teacher," the teaching philosophy statement is a good place to begin a career-long search for an answer to an important question (one that you someday may have to answer as part of a tenure review process): what do you think constitutes effective teaching, a) in general; and b) in your discipline?

Statement of teaching competency

This section serves as a bridge between your teaching philosophy statement and the syllabi and other course-related teaching materials you provide in the appendices. Here you solidify your argument that you have attained each of the seven "core competencies," making direct reference to the items in the appendices which illustrate that attainment. The objective is to provide a context for anyone examining the materials you are using as evidence. In a sense you are answering the unspoken question: What does this syllabus, this assignment, this example of student work, etc. provide evidence of? The answer is your way of linking your stated beliefs about how students learn (teaching philosophy) and your own practice.

One of the hallmarks of an effective teacher is the ability to reflect upon his/her classroom experiences--both positive and negative--and to grow from those experiences. This section shows that you have done so. In essence it's a "lessons learned" statement with an eye to using those lessons as a means of self-improvement. In this section you can be open about approaches you have tried without complete success; you can admit that you, like all teachers, have run up against problems you couldn't solve the first time around. Indicating ways in which you have responded to challenging situations shows you to be a responsible teacher, one who has learned from mistakes to become a better teacher.

Teaching goals

Here you can discuss the specific areas and ways in which you would like to improve your teaching. Keep your "goals" statement limited to two or three goals, each of which you can address in a single paragraph. Each goal should be accompanied by a plan, i.e., specific ways of achieving the particular goal.

Appendices

A rule of thumb is that nothing speaks for itself. Your materials "speak" through the selection process, through the contextualizing discussions in previous sections, and through the "transparent" organization of the portfolio. For example, including student evaluations makes sense if you provide your own evaluative statement of those student evaluations. So too, sample assignments or examples of student work should be linked directly to a statement about how the assignment enhances or assesses understanding, or what the student work tells us about that student's learning in your course. If you include graded student papers, you might choose one very good paper and one poor one, both annotated to show why you judged them as you did.

Keep in mind that there should be a three-way link from philosophy to design to execution. A well-constructed portfolio makes the linkage clear with each of the materials chosen for inclusion.

Other items

If there are other items you think might help show your strengths or record your growth as a teacher, consider an appendix devoted to such "teaching related activities" as the following:

- seminars, conferences, etc, regarding college teaching
- descriptions of efforts to improve your teaching
- evidence of work with individual students, such as advising or research guidance
- materials related to courses not overviewed in prior appendices
- video footage from actual classes, labs, or discussion groups

The role of your teaching committee

A requirement of GRAD 990 is that your teaching be supervised and evaluated by a faculty teaching committee. This committee consists of three faculty members-- two from your field or discipline and one appointed by the Teaching Excellence program. You should coordinate the recruitment and selection process with the Director of the Teaching Excellence Program. The Director of the Teaching Excellence Program will review an initial draft

of your teaching portfolio, after which your teaching committee will go over it, making suggestions for improvements and expansions. Often one or more members of the committee will ask to visit a class and furnish a formal assessment, which you may or may not choose to include in your portfolio.

Conclusion

Over the past several years the staff of Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning have helped many graduate students develop teaching portfolios as demonstrations of their teaching abilities. Along the way we have learned some valuable lessons. Among them are the following generalizations:

* **Effective teaching portfolios are "reader friendly"**

Simply put, keep your writing clear, direct, and as free of jargon as possible. Whatever organizing principles you use, be sure to make the organization clear to your audience.

* **Effective teaching portfolios contextualize everything**

Side notes or introductory statements help readers understand what they are reading and why they are reading it. Raw data should never be presented; instead everything should be summarized and contextualized. The reader should be given conclusions to consider.

* **Effective portfolios demonstrate teaching-readiness and job-readiness**

Faculty (including department chairs) want peers who can contribute upon appointment to the teaching mission of their academic departments. Experience is still considered the best teacher. Without it you are still untried and untested; with it you can demonstrate your ability to contribute immediately upon appointment and to enhance your contributions over a career. Therefore it is important that the portfolio appropriately document how you have used your Praxis to demonstrate to potential faculty colleagues your readiness to assist their department with its teaching mission.

Competition for faculty positions remains strong in most fields and disciplines. Faculty search committees frequently must sift through many candidates who are interested, to find those that could truly contribute to their department. It is essential that your portfolio make it easy for potential faculty peers to glean from your teaching portfolio a strong sense of who you are as a teacher, as well as evidence of your accomplishments.

As a side note, it is important to remember that a curriculum vitae, a teaching portfolio, and other products of your graduate education can at best help you get face-to-face interviews. A successful candidate for a faculty position is one who has convinced future faculty colleagues that he or she is the best choice for a specific position. In other words, while an effective teaching portfolio will help you get interviews, after that it is your responsibility to demonstrate to a search committee that you (and your unique qualifications) are their best option.

* **Effective teaching portfolios are both biographical and thematic**

Everyone expects that you will continue to mature as a teacher. That is not the point of the portfolio. Instead, the portfolio presents your argument that your education and professional experience have prepared you to begin your formal career. Above all else it communicates who you are as a teacher and illustrates to your committee (and potential colleagues) the special skills and insights you bring to the academic profession.

Resources

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