

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEACHING PORTFOLIO

This note describes the concept, aims, and preparation of a teaching portfolio. The discussion here is intended to be an introduction to the subject, and a guide to other resources for the interested person. The topic will be of interest to at least three kinds of readers:

- The recipient of a new Ph.D. who is entering the job market for the first time
- The junior instructor who is a candidate for promotion or tenure
- The senior instructor who wishes to document a completed segment of work

The Concept of the Teaching Portfolio

The teaching portfolio is an *evidence-based* document about one's teaching philosophy and effectiveness. It is a compilation of reflections and "best work" to indicate what the person has done in the past and might do in the future. The portfolio is necessarily a mixture of documentation and advocacy—one is framing the past work as a teacher, but doing so in a fact-based way.

The teaching portfolio complements professional summations of one's research, administrative service, consulting or government service, and outreach. Thus, the teaching portfolio would serve easily as a segment of one's entire professional portfolio.

The term "portfolio" has two senses: (1) a 6-to-10-page narrative that presents an overview and summary of teaching work and (2) the narrative *and* supporting appendices that together might fill a large three-ring binder. The discussion that follows focuses on the narrative only as completing the narrative is the entry barrier to the larger work. Needless to say, a finished job should include narrative and appendices.

This technical note was prepared by Professor Robert F. Bruner, who acknowledges helpful comments and inspiration from Dennis Proffitt, Judith Reagan, Elliott Weiss, and the Teaching Resource Center at the University of Virginia. Copyright © 2000 by the University of Virginia Darden School Foundation, Charlottesville, VA. All rights reserved. *To order copies, send an e-mail to dardencases@virginia.edu. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, used in a spreadsheet, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without the permission of the Darden School Foundation.*

Why Prepare It?

There are numerous possible motives for presenting one's professional work as a teacher:

- *Entering the job market:* Many newly minted Ph.D.'s have taught and wish to present themselves to the market as accomplished classroom leaders.
- *Prepare for tenure and promotion decisions:* Candidates want, and need, to discuss their teaching. Promotion committees place increasing emphasis on teaching skills. Discussion of the candidate's past experience and plans in this area addresses a large swath of work.
- *Document good work done; leave a legacy:* Instructors who are cycling out of challenging teaching assignments will find the portfolio an excellent device for conveying learnings and suggestions to the inbound instructors. Senior colleagues carry a wealth of tacit knowledge that if captured in a portfolio can strengthen the efforts of their junior colleagues.
- *Get perspective; take stock:* The teaching portfolio is an excellent vehicle for reflecting on where one has been and is headed in one's development as a teacher.
- *Contribute to a conversation about teaching philosophy and style:* Within any school resides a variety of philosophies and approaches. A collection of teaching portfolios can help make that variety transparent and the basis for a richer discussion about teaching within the school.

What It Contains

No formal template exists for the teaching portfolio. The contents are necessarily idiosyncratic. The document must be adapted to the attributes of the writer and the purposes of the portfolio. To stimulate the reader's imagination, here is a list of elements one might consider including in the portfolio:

1. *Introduction:* Why you are writing this, and what the narrative contains.
2. *A summary of your teaching:* This should include course titles, years, numbers of students, and references to course syllabuses, given in an appendix. The survey should also refer to all the ways in which one "teaches": responsibilities for delivering courses in degree programs, advising students and projects, supervising Ph.D. candidates, leading educational programs, teaching in nondegree programs, teaching in private consulting.

3. *A description of how you teach:* This gives a profile of your teaching style. What is a “typical” class of yours like? How do you prepare? How do you implement your plans? What do you find easy? Challenging? Done thoughtfully, this section should paint an engaging picture of your work in the classroom.
4. *A statement of why you teach that way and your teaching philosophy:* This illuminates your values and concept of exemplary teaching.
5. *A discussion of the link* between your teaching, research, and service to the school. Common to many successful professionals is connectivity or integration among one’s work activities. You might discuss how your research and service inform, enrich, and energize your teaching.
6. *Highlighted examples* of your teaching efforts. Your “best hits” should be profiled here, and might survey a successful course design (with syllabus), an impactful educational program you delivered, teaching materials you prepared, or an illustration of how you adapted your teaching style to new circumstances or challenges.
7. *Evidence of your teaching effectiveness:* Most schools prepare numerical evaluations of instructors and give benchmark ratings for the entire faculty against which your evaluations can be compared. But you can go further, quoting from a sample of students’ qualitative comments that highlight your particular strengths, or from unsolicited (and perhaps solicited) letters and e-mails that comment on your teaching effectiveness. Finally, you might incorporate examples of outstanding student work¹ done under your direction, with a commentary by you showing how this work reflects your teaching.
8. *Plans for continuing professional development:* What skills would you like to learn, or develop further? How will you pursue these? Your discussion here might reference a program of reading, classroom observation (of you and by you), videotaping, attending workshops and presentations, etc.

The list could be extended considerably. The reader will find suggestions for more items in the resources recommended at the end of this document.

How to Prepare a Portfolio

While there are no “correct” models for the teaching portfolio, there are probably many wrong ones. The following tips are aimed at avoiding some common problems, and simply completing the job:

¹The writer should *always* solicit the permission of students to include their work in the portfolio, copy it, or place it on the Web.

- *Obtain a clear sense of audience to strike the right tone:* The tone of the portfolio will vary in subtle ways from one audience to the next. In some instances (such as a candidacy for tenure) one should solicit advice about the contents of the document.
- *Study exemplars:* Some universities maintain collections of teaching portfolios. For instance, the University of Virginia maintains a collection of portfolios at the Teaching Resource Center.²
- *Attend a teaching-portfolio workshop:* Some universities offer short programs in which participants collaborate in the development of teaching portfolios. Comments, suggestions, and coaching in these settings can be invaluable. The University of Virginia's Teaching Resource Center offers a teaching-portfolio workshop annually, in May.
- *Get a portfolio mentor:* This should be a sympathetic individual who understands the nature of your writing challenge and is a critical thinker. Experience suggests that mentors outside of one's own discipline are more helpful than those closer to home.
- *Be careful not to undersell; don't be afraid to crow:* The portfolio should contain one's best work. Some achievements may not speak for themselves; elaborate a little for the reader.
- *Avoid overblown, unsupported language:* This is a constraint on the preceding point. Don't get carried away in presenting your work. Try carefully to document assertions, especially those about teaching effectiveness.
- *Focus the discussion in the document around just a few key ideas; avoid a collection of random statements:* Step into the shoes of the reader and ask, "What is this person trying to say?" Most people are selective readers. Long, unfocused documents risk muddling what may be a central message.
- *Avoid redundancy:* You can overcompensate in trying to drive home a central message.
- *Use simple declarative statements:* Florid Latinate language can obfuscate the uttermost intelligent missive.
- *Keep the narrative short, no more than 10 typewritten pages:* It is easy to write a long, unfocused narrative, and hard to achieve focus and brevity. This means that you must provide adequate time to refine the document.

²University of Virginia, Teaching Resource Center, Hotel D, 24 East Range, Charlottesville, VA 22903; Marva A. Barnett, Director, telephone 804-982-2815.

Though these points are common sense for all writing, they have special importance in the case of the teaching portfolio. One is rarely trained in the development of these documents; reminders like these will help.

The best advice in writing a portfolio is to keep one's attention on ultimate aims (e.g., those listed in the section "Why Prepare It?"). The point of the effort is not to write a portfolio, it is to get a job, become a better teacher, etc.

Recommended Resources for Further Study

The University of Virginia's Teaching Resource Center maintains an excellent collection of written materials on teaching portfolios. Visit the TRC at <http://www.virginia.edu/~trc/>.

Murray, John P. *Successful Faculty Development and Evaluation: The Complete Teaching Portfolio*, ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 8. Washington, D.C.: George Washington University, Graduate School of Education and Human Development, 1995.

Schoenfeld, A. Clay, and Robert Magnan. *Mentor in a Manual: Climbing the Academic Ladder to Tenure*. 2d ed. Madison, Wis.: Magna, 1994. See especially the chapter "Documenting Your Teaching Activities," pages 254-58.

Seldin, Peter. *The Teaching Portfolio: A Practical Guide to Improved Performance and Promotion/Tenure Decisions*. 2d ed. Bolton, Mass.: Anker Publishing (ISBN 1-882982-150-0). The first two chapters of this book may be viewed on the Internet at the following address: http://www.lgu.ac.uk/deliberations/portfolios/ICED_workshop/seldin_book.html.

Seldin, P., L. Annis, and J. Zbizarreta. "Answers to Common Questions about the Teaching Portfolio." *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching* 6, no. 1 (1995): 57-64.

Examples of teaching portfolios on the Web:

<http://www.virginia.edu/~trc/barnett/>

<http://www.people.virginia.edu/~cd4y/>

http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/curry/class/edlf/589_004/