

3 Portfolios have now been used successfully for almost two decades to document teaching accomplishments and can serve both to stimulate reflection about good practice and to provide evidence for major career decisions.

Using Portfolios to Document Good Teaching: Premises, Purposes, Practices

Christopher Knapper, W. Alan Wright

Although their use in higher education dates back only to the 1980s, teaching portfolios are now found in colleges and universities worldwide. They are being used to document teaching in places as diverse as New Zealand, Sri Lanka, Trinidad, and Hong Kong, as well as the United States and Canada where the concept originated. The underlying idea of portfolios seems self-evident and has long been associated with the fine arts and architecture. People picture a portfolio as a large, slim, zippered, leather case with a carrying handle, brimming with drawings, sketches, portraits, and the like—all designed to demonstrate the professional's talent, expertise, and proficiency. But in fact, the analogy of the teaching portfolio as a collection of "best work" may be rather misleading. As we will see later, an effective portfolio requires selection and organization and must give a rounded picture of teaching ability in order to be convincing for those who read it.

As Knapper (1995) has described, the recent origins of the portfolio can be traced back to the work of a committee of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), which was concerned in the 1970s with the undue reliance on student ratings for the evaluation of teaching. This group called for a more broadly based approach to evaluation that would use multiple sources of information and place responsibility for compiling the documentation on the individual faculty member rather than a remote administrator. The committee chair, Bruce Shore, first articulated the idea that faculty members should build their own case for teaching effectiveness—a "portfolio of evidence" to demonstrate competence (Shore, 1975, p. 8). Shortly afterward, the committee set about preparing its *Guide to the*

Knapper, C. & Cranton, P. (editors) (2001). *Fresh Approaches to the Evaluation of Teaching*. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, No. 88. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. ISBN 0787957895

Teaching Dossier, which was first published in 1980; it appeared in a second edition in 1986 and has been widely emulated and excerpted since then in a variety of publications all over the world (Shore and others, 1980, 1986). In Canada, the concept is still known as the teaching dossier. In the United States, Shore's original term *portfolio* was preferred, perhaps because it had less sinister connotations in the dying days of the Cold War.

The rationale for the teaching portfolio is spelled out clearly in the opening pages of the *CAUT Guide*. It was intended to be a "summary of a professor's major teaching accomplishments and strengths" (Shore and others, 1986, p. 1) in the same way that lists of publications, grants, and academic honors reflect research activity. It would take the form of "selected short descriptions that will accurately convey the scope and quality of the professor's teaching" and "just as statements about research in a CV should be supportable by more complete evidence (for example, published papers or actual research data), so statements made in a teaching dossier should be substantiated by more complete evidence related to teaching activity" (Shore and others, 1986, p. 1).

Some key words here are *accurate*, *substantiated*, and *evidence*. Although the CAUT committee felt that a portfolio should naturally put forward the best possible case, such a case had to be supportable by evidence in order to be honest, valid, and convincing. In a sense, they were arguing for an approach to documenting good teaching that anticipates the notion of "classroom research" advocated by Cross (1986) and the Boyer-Rice concept of the "scholarship of teaching" (Boyer, 1990). They argue that recording competence and effectiveness in teaching is different from recording research or service, largely because many faculty fail to keep records of what they do as teachers. Many do not recognize the need for taking the initiative and regard the collection of evaluation data as the responsibility of others. "One of the reasons is lack of knowledge of how and what to record" (Shore and others, 1986, p. 3).

Another interesting aspect of the original *Guide* is the recommended length for a portfolio, which the writers felt should be no more than three pages (partly because they envisaged it being incorporated in a traditional *vitae*). Most teaching portfolios today are much longer than this, though a good case can still be made for limits on length (say around ten pages, excluding appendixes), especially when large numbers of portfolios are being reviewed by a committee or busy administrators.

The *Guide* next outlines the steps needed to create a portfolio, which are still valid and useful. They include clarifying and documenting teaching responsibilities, selecting criteria for effective teaching, compiling evidence in support of those criteria, summarizing the evidence, and collecting exemplary material as back-up if needed.

The longest section of the *Guide* is the one that has been copied most frequently: the famous list of forty-nine categories (or types of evidence) that might be included in a portfolio, grouped under the headings "The products of good teaching" (for example, student work and achievements),

"Material from oneself" (description of teaching duties, course syllabi, instructional innovations, and so on), and "Information from others" (including students, colleagues, alumni, even employers). In other words, the portfolio is seen not as a new *method* of evaluation but rather a *system* for collecting, combining, and organizing information from a wide range of sources, including traditional approaches to teaching evaluations such as peer visits and student ratings. It was envisaged that portfolios would be used mainly for major career decisions such as tenure and promotion, but it was also apparent that compiling a portfolio would stimulate a good deal of reflection about teaching by the individual concerned and by those who read the portfolio.

The Idea Spreads

Although tens of thousands of copies of the *Guide* were distributed, the idea of teaching portfolios was rather slow to take off in Canada, and it was only after the adoption of the concept in the United States that the use of portfolios became widespread. Peter Seldin, who had learned about teaching dossiers at a European conference in 1978, mentioned the idea in his influential 1980 book on teaching evaluation (Seldin, 1980) and later wrote and spoke extensively about portfolios in universities across North America and beyond (see, for example, Seldin, 1991). The American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) convened a national roundtable on portfolios in 1990 and produced one publication relating the concept to the scholarship of teaching (Edgerton, Hutchings, and Quinlan, 1991) and another with accounts of the use of the portfolio throughout the United States (twenty-four institutions) and Canada (one institution) (Anderson, 1993).

Canadians presented the portfolio idea in Australia in the early 1980s through workshops and articles (for example, Knapper, 1981), and in 1987 the Federation of Australian University Staff Associations issued its own guide (Roe, 1987). Portfolios are now widely used through Australia and New Zealand and have indeed been adopted for broader purposes, as Cannon describes in Chapter Nine. In the United Kingdom, the portfolio idea was first presented by Gibbs (1988), who used the term *teaching profile*. Although the exact nature of its use and effectiveness is hard to document, there must be few countries, especially those with Western-style university systems, where teaching portfolios are unknown or untried. In the survey conducted by Wright and O'Neil (1995) of 331 faculty developers in Canada, the United States, Britain, and Australia, participants were asked to rank the use of portfolios as an effective means of improving teaching. The rankings generally fell around the mid-point in a list of thirty-six items and seemed to indicate general familiarity with and acceptance of the portfolio concept.

Organizing a Portfolio

The present chapter is not intended as a practical guide to the preparation of a portfolio; there are many of those (for example O'Neil and Wright, 1995; Knapper and Wilcox, 1998). However, now that portfolios have been used successfully for several years, it is worth summarizing the main components. One way of providing a brief snapshot of what a portfolio looks like is to show a sample table of contents. Exhibit 3.1 shows the main headings a professor of pharmacy used in a portfolio prepared in the early 1990s. More information about this portfolio can be found in O'Neil and Wright, 1995.

This is a fairly comprehensive portfolio—one that closely mirrors the structure recommended in the *Guide*. It should not be regarded as a template, however, because a key principle of the teaching portfolio is that the content, organization, and presentation are controlled by the individual teacher. There have been attempts in the past to “automate” portfolios by providing fill-in-the-box computerized forms, but this undermines the underlying philosophy of the portfolio approach, which has the advantage of allowing different teachers to tailor a portfolio to their own needs. A portfolio also allows the compiler to provide commentary to help readers interpret what is there—for example to explain gaps or apparent inconsistencies, or even to comment on possibly negative information, such as a poor evaluation by students. At the same time, of course, such commentary must be plausible and not just self-serving, or the whole effort will backfire.

Although each portfolio will be different in both form and content, many commonalities exist. Listed next are the ten most frequently used items, as gathered by Wright from over three hundred faculty at a number of North American colleges and universities (O'Neil and Wright, 1995). Again the data should be regarded as indicative rather than prescriptive.

1. Student course and teaching evaluation data which suggest improvements or produce an overall rating of effectiveness or satisfaction
2. List of course titles and numbers, unit values or credits, enrollments with brief elaboration
3. List of course materials prepared for students
4. Participation in seminars, workshops, and professional meetings intended to improve teaching
5. Statements from colleagues who have observed teaching either as members of a teaching team or as independent observers of a particular course, or who teach other sections of the same course
6. Attempts at instructional innovations and evaluations of their effectiveness
7. Unstructured (and possibly unsolicited) written evaluations by students, including written comments on exams and letters received after a course has been completed

Exhibit 3.1. Table of Contents for a Teaching Portfolio

-
- A. Statement of Teaching Responsibilities
 - 1. Courses Taught
 - 2. Student Advising
 - individual students
 - student committees
 - 3. Practicums Organized and Supervised
 - B. Statement of My Teaching Philosophy and Goals
 - C. Efforts to Improve Teaching
 - 1. Formal Courses in Education
 - 2. Conferences Attended
 - 3. Workshops Attended
 - 4. Participation in Peer Consultation
 - D. Redevelopment of Existing Courses
 - 1. Addition of Tutorials, Role-playing, Case Studies, and so on
 - 2. Incorporation of Writing Skills
 - 3. Incorporation of Oral Presentation Skills
 - 4. Appendix of Representative Course Syllabus and Assignments
 - E. Information from Students
 - 1. Summary of Student Ratings
 - 2. Comments from Student Committees Regarding Advising
 - F. Service to Teaching
 - 1. Evaluating Term Papers, Chair
 - 2. Faculty Evaluation, Co-Chair
 - 3. Curriculum Committee, Member
 - 4. Clinical Task Force of Curriculum Committee, Member
 - G. Information from Colleagues
 - H. Information from Other Sources
 - 1. Guest Lectures to Other Faculties
 - 2. Continuing Education Lectures for Peers
 - 3. Lectures to Special Interest Groups of the Public
 - I. Future Teaching Goals
-

Source: From the portfolio of Professor Margaret Ackman, College of Pharmacy, Dalhousie University.

- 8. Participating in course or curriculum development
- 9. Evidence of effective supervision on Honors, Master's, or Ph.D. thesis
- 10. Student essays, creative work, and projects or field work reports¹

After many years of reading teaching portfolios and helping many hundreds of faculty to prepare them, we suggest a number of common elements that should almost always be included. First there should be a statement of teaching responsibilities, including details of courses taught, student theses supervised, and service on teaching-related committees (for instance the department curriculum committee). Second is a statement of teaching

approach or philosophy, which should reflect underlying teaching principles and include brief examples of how these ideas have been put into practice. Third, data from students, the main "beneficiaries" of teaching (often summaries of student ratings) should be included. We also favor starting with a brief biographical statement to help place the portfolio in context, especially if it is to be a stand-alone document rather than part of a larger vitae. In the case of a faculty member or graduate student at the beginning of a career, it is useful to have a statement of future teaching plans that conveys the idea that the portfolio (and teaching itself) is dynamic, not static. This is the bare bones of a portfolio, and nearly all faculty will be able to include more, in particular evidence of teaching effectiveness from sources other than student ratings, descriptions of teaching innovations, and information about professional development undertaken.

Although more experienced academics will have more evidence in more categories than their junior colleagues, it is important to emphasize that a portfolio should consist of *summaries*, not *raw data*. For example, original course evaluation forms and even multiple testimonials are out of place. In this respect, we might distinguish between the relatively concise portfolio and the larger "portmanteau" containing raw data that can be consulted if necessary (perhaps analogous to the distinction between a tax return and the shoe box used to collect receipts). Some faculty compromise by preparing a fairly short portfolio but attaching appendixes. For summative purposes, this is appropriate within reason, as long as the portfolio alone can stand on its own merits and is short enough to be manageable reading for busy department heads and committee members.

One interesting by-product of embarking on the process of preparing the first portfolio is the realization of how much information is lacking about teaching activities and effectiveness, just as Shore and others (1986) had predicted. In some cases, information that was once available has been lost or discarded; in other cases, it was never collected in the first place. Hence involvement in the portfolio process can be a powerful challenge and impetus to better documentation of teaching processes and outcomes, as Fenwick suggests in Chapter Seven.

Apart from the question of length, one of the most frequent questions raised about portfolios is what span of time they should cover. This depends on the purpose for which the document is to be used, but a good rule of thumb is at least three years—or longer if the teacher is facing a major career decision such as tenure or promotion. But documenting teaching accomplishments from the distant past (say student ratings from six or more years ago) becomes less pertinent as time passes.

Functions and Uses of Portfolios

One difference of opinion about portfolios concerns whether they are most valuable for summative (as originally envisaged by CAUT) or for formative purposes. Further, many proponents of the portfolio approach suggest that

an early decision regarding purpose and intended audience is essential, as it will guide and inform the writer's every decision in the portfolio preparation process.

Summative and Formative Uses of Portfolios. It is true that a portfolio intended for a college promotions committee may well take shape quite differently from one intended solely for reflection and teaching improvement purposes. In practice, however, we have found that the differences between the "summative" and the "formative" portfolio are not as great as might be expected. In workshops on portfolio writing for faculty, we habitually ask participants to define their essential purpose as they approach the various tasks. Although a relatively high percentage stress preparation of a document for their tenure and promotion file as the immediate motivation, the resulting documents do not appear to be substantially different from those eventually developed by those tenured professors seeking an avenue to reflection and teaching improvement.

This observation is borne out by the collections of portfolios published regularly since 1995 following Dalhousie University's Annual Recording Teaching Accomplishment Institute. Participants in this intensive, week-long portfolio-writing and consultation process typically express their satisfaction with regard to both the product (the fruits of their five-day effort) and the process, including the workshops, consultations, reflection, writing, and peer mentoring. Goal-oriented participants frequently mention that they were surprised by just how positive and revealing they found the series of encounters with the portfolio experts and colleagues, coupled with the hours of solitary reflection and writing.

In addition to their use for tenure, promotion, and annual performance reviews, portfolios have been employed in the preparation of teaching award files, as a post facto means of articulating an approach to teaching by award winners, as an exemplary document by senior faculty, as a "legacy" document by retiring departmental "builders" or pioneers, as developmental files by graduate teaching assistants, as a part of documentation submitted for a job search, and as a source of evidence for the accreditation of teaching competence (as Beaty describes in Chapter Eight).

In practice, then, the formative and summative purposes of the teaching portfolio merge. Even when prepared largely for summative purposes, the very act of collecting information and interpreting it inevitably leads to self-appraisal and thoughts about possible changes. At the same time, the contents of a portfolio prepared for self-improvement and reflection (for example the material in a statement of teaching philosophy) can be extremely useful to a tenure and promotions committee as an aid to interpreting the results of student evaluations.

Use of Portfolios in Other Contexts. Although the portfolio concept was originally developed to document the teaching accomplishments of individual faculty members, it has also been used for other purposes and contexts, for example, to document teaching in entire departments and institutions, as Cannon describes in Chapter Nine. Wright and Miller

(2000) describe an educational developer's portfolio, and Knapper (1995) has suggested that portfolios might be used profitably to document university service or even scholarly work, with the aim of broadening the documentation of professional work beyond mere lists so as to show impact.

The Validity of Portfolios

One question frequently raised about portfolios is how valid they are, in particular whether judgments made on the basis of reviewing portfolios are fairer and more accurate than judgments derived from narrower sources of data, such as student ratings. In one sense, portfolios do have face validity simply because they present a fuller picture of teaching than student evaluations alone can provide, with more information and a wider range of sources. In another sense, the lack of a common format for portfolios and the fact that they are compiled by the person being evaluated often leads to suspicion about their reliability and objectivity.

The subject of portfolio evaluation has figured in the literature on portfolios since the early 1990s (Anderson, 1993; Edgerton, Hutchings, and Quinlan, 1991; Seldin, 1993). But formal studies of portfolio procedures, especially those focusing on reliability and validity, are scarce. AAHE described a number of institutional evaluation frameworks in 1993 (Anderson, 1993), ranging from checklists to quantitative models. Canadian guides to the teaching portfolio also provided samples of evaluative procedures (for example, O'Neil and Wright, 1995).

How well, in practice, have faculty aspiring to tenure and promotion been served by their portfolios, as judged by faculty and administrative colleagues? In 1993, Pat Hutchings carried out a major study of American universities using portfolios for the AAHE, and she concluded that they were largely successful.

Even . . . where portfolios are being used to determine tenure and promotion by committees having little experience with them—judgments have been arrived at, committees have stood behind these decisions, faculty have not flocked to grieve the process. In fact . . . the process of reading and reviewing portfolios has turned out to be illuminating and significant. I hear chairs talking about a better understanding of teaching and learning . . . as a result of reading portfolios. (Anderson, 1993, p. 3)

Although this is encouraging, there are almost no hard data on the success rate of professors who have submitted portfolios for career advancement purposes. Centra (1993) is one of the few researchers to gather data on portfolio reliability and validity. He compared tenure and promotion committee decisions based on portfolios with judgments made without them and found that judgments are reasonably reliable (in the sense of having inter-

judge agreement), as long as the judges worked from specified criteria. He concluded that using a portfolio for summative decisions about teaching can provide a more complete picture of performance and that evaluation of portfolios can undoubtedly benefit from discussion among evaluators about standards and criteria; he recommended that portfolios should include not only what individuals and others say about their teaching but examples of what they actually *do*.

This reflects a common finding that inter-rater reliability in many domains is enhanced when specific criteria are provided and raises the obvious point that, in order to judge effective teaching, there needs to be agreement about just what constitutes effectiveness. We should beware of trying to force portfolios into a quantitative paradigm when one of their strengths is providing rich qualitative data that will be different from person to person. Nonetheless, it is helpful when adopting portfolios to have criteria for judging them that have been discussed and agreed to by members of the teaching community affected, whether at the institutional, school, or departmental level.

One way of doing this has been tried at Queen's University, Ontario, using criteria derived from a statement of effective teaching developed by a university committee. The criteria include *commitment to teaching, teaching load and responsibilities, communication skills, course design and teaching methods, respect for student diversity, involvement in self-evaluation and reflective practice, curriculum development, and teaching scholarship*. Those judging portfolios (for example, members of a promotions committee) are provided with a matrix that lists these criteria (with some explanation and amplification) in the left-hand column. In two adjacent columns, they are asked to note first what relevant evidence is contained in the portfolio and second, based on this evidence, how well the teacher meets the criteria. Judges undertake this task independently, then exchange notes. They typically report that having the criteria is extremely useful in helping interpret evidence in portfolios and guiding subsequent discussions.

Conclusions

What can we conclude about the contribution of teaching portfolios to evaluation? First, we can say that they have put more control of the evaluation process into the hands of the individual teacher. Second, teachers are required to take responsibility for documenting teaching accomplishments and finding methods to assess effectiveness of teaching practices. In this sense, as argued earlier, portfolios are quite consistent with ideas underlying classroom research and the scholarship of teaching. Third, portfolios blur the line between summative and formative evaluation. Although they can be used for accountability purposes, to prepare a persuasive teaching portfolio requires both self-evaluation and reflection about personal teaching goals. Fourth, portfolios challenge institutions to develop evaluation

processes that are much more sophisticated and broadly based than is possible when relying simply on the results of student ratings. This involves a mutual responsibility on the part of faculty and institutions. On the one hand, faculty must be willing to take the time to document and summarize their teaching accomplishments. On the other hand, faculty colleagues and administrators must ensure that portfolios are taken seriously in the academic rewards process. If evaluation is carried out but no rewards are seen to flow from the process, then there will be little incentive to document teaching or gather evidence for its effectiveness.

References

- Anderson, E. (ed.). *Campus Use of the Teaching Portfolio: Twenty-Five Profiles*. Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education, 1993.
- Boyer, E. L. *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. Princeton, N.J.: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990.
- Centra, J. A. *Reflective Faculty Evaluation: Enhancing Teaching and Determining Faculty Effectiveness*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.
- Cross, K. P. "A Proposal to Improve Teaching or What 'Taking Teaching Seriously' Should Mean." *American Association for Higher Education Bulletin*, 1986, 39(1), 9-14.
- Edgerton, R., Hutchings, P., and Quinlan, K. *The Teaching Portfolio: Capturing the Scholarship in Teaching*. Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education, 1991.
- Gibbs, G. *Creating a Teaching Profile*. Bristol, England: Teaching and Educational Services, 1988.
- Knapper, C. K. "Evaluating University Instruction: The Teaching Dossier." *HERDSA News*, Nov. 1981, pp. 5-7.
- Knapper, C. K. "The Origins of Teaching Portfolios." *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 1995, 6(1), 45-56.
- Knapper, C. K., and Wilcox, S. *Preparing a Teaching Dossier*. Kingston, Canada: Queen's University Instructional Development Centre, 1998.
- O'Neil, C., and Wright, W. A. *Recording Teaching Accomplishment: A Dalhousie Guide to the Teaching Dossier*. (5th ed.) Halifax, Canada: Dalhousie University Office of Instructional Development and Technology, 1995.
- Roe, E. *How to Compile a Teaching Portfolio*. Kensington, Australia: Federation of Australian University Staff Associations, 1987.
- Seldin, P. *Successful Faculty Evaluation Programs: A Practical Guide to Improve Faculty Performance and Promotion/Tenure Decisions*. Crugers, N.Y.: Coventry Press, 1980.
- Seldin, P. *The Teaching Portfolio: A Practical Guide to Improved Performance and Promotion/Tenure Decisions*. Bolton, Mass.: Anker, 1991.
- Seldin, P., and Associates. *Successful Use of Teaching Portfolios*. Bolton, Mass.: Anker, 1993.
- Shore, B. M. "Moving beyond the Course Evaluation Questionnaire in Evaluating University Teaching." *CAUT Bulletin*, 1975, 23(4), 7-10.
- Shore, B. M., and Associates. *The Teaching Dossier: A Guide to its Preparation and Use*. Ottawa: Canadian Association of University Teachers, 1980.
- Shore, B. M., and Associates. *The Teaching Dossier: A Guide to its Preparation and Use*. (rev. ed.) Ottawa: Canadian Association of University Teachers, 1986.
- Wright, W. A., and O'Neil, M. C. "Teaching Improvement Practices: International

Perspectives." In W. A. Wright and Associates, *Teaching Improvement Practices: Successful Strategies for Higher Education*, pp. 1-57. Bolton, Mass.: Anker, 1995.

Wright, W. A., and Miller, J. A. "The Educational Developer's Portfolio." *International Journal for Academic Development*, 2000, 5, 20-29.

W. ALAN WRIGHT is director of instructional development and technology at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

CHRISTOPHER KNAPPER is director of the Instructional Development Centre at Queen's University, Ontario.