

7 Teaching portfolios

The nature of a teaching portfolio

A teaching portfolio is a collection of documents and other items that provides information about different aspects of a teacher's work. It serves to describe and document the teacher's performance, to facilitate professional development, and to provide a basis for reflection and review. Like many of the procedures described in this book, it is another form of teacher development that is built around self-appraisal and teacher-directed learning. Evans (1995, p. 11) characterizes the nature of a portfolio in the following way:

A professional portfolio is an evolving collection of carefully selected or composed professional thoughts, goals, and experiences that are threaded with reflection and self-assessment. It represents who you are, what you do, why you do it, where you have been, where you are, where you want to go, and how you plan on getting there.

A portfolio consists of a set of different types of documents and artifacts that have been selected on a principled basis (see below) and that are organized to tell a story. The collection is updated and revised when needed and is accompanied by the teacher's account of the rationale behind the collection. The portfolio can both serve as the basis for self-appraisal and be a component of the teacher's assessment.

Purpose and benefits of creating a portfolio

Teachers we have worked with find that a portfolio serves a number of purposes. First, it provides a demonstration of how a teacher approaches his or her work and presents evidence of the teacher's thinking, creativity, resourcefulness, and effectiveness. The portfolio can thus be submitted to a supervisor or manager as evidence of the standard of the teacher's performance.

Second, a portfolio serves as a source of review and reflection. The process of compiling the portfolio prompts the teacher to engage in a comprehensive self-assessment of different aspects of his or her work. By reviewing the portfolio (in consultation with a colleague or supervisor, if necessary), the teacher can make decisions about priorities and goals and areas for future development or improvement.

Third, a portfolio can promote collaboration with other teachers. For example, it can become part of the process of peer coaching (see Chapter 10); the peer reviews and discusses the portfolio and uses it to give feedback about the teacher's work. A particularly useful type of portfolio is one that is part of a team-teaching collaboration in which two teachers create a joint portfolio to accompany a class they both teach.

Working portfolio and showcase portfolio

There are two different types of portfolios, reflecting differences in their purpose and audience: a *working portfolio* and a *showcase portfolio*.

A working portfolio contains items that show how a teacher has progressed toward meeting a particular goal. For example, a teacher might decide he or she wants to move toward a more student-centered approach to learning. The portfolio contains documents and other items that provide evidence that this goal has been reached. Or a teacher might be trying to implement a genre-based approach (materials organized around genre types) in a writing course and the items in the portfolio are assembled in order to show how this has been achieved.

A showcase portfolio, as the name suggests, is designed to show the teacher at his or her best. Thus, it contains a collection of items that have been selected to show the range and depth of skills the teacher possesses. This kind of portfolio might be submitted as a part of an appraisal or included in an application for a new teaching position or for promotion. Teachers sometimes show us impressive portfolios of this kind. The following vignette shows how a teacher in Japan who is on a 2-year renewable contract is required to compile a showcase portfolio.

Vignette

Every faculty member at this university (in Japan) is required to submit a portfolio every 2 years for evaluation by an elected committee of faculty peers and the administration. The standards for this portfolio and its evaluation are outlined in detail in the university's Faculty Handbook. Specifically,

the Faculty Review Committee (FRC) judges the responsiveness of candidates to problems in their teaching and their willingness to adapt teaching philosophies, styles, and strategies to the requirements of the university's program.

On the surface, it's very straightforward because the portfolio requirements and evaluation procedures are laid out in eight pages of text. The required materials for submission are: an updated curriculum vitae; a concise letter of self-evaluation of teaching, service, collegiality, and scholarship; highly selective samples of course materials demonstrating pedagogical approach, creativity, willingness to adjust to the educational needs of the students, and standards of judgment on student performance; and pertinent examples of scholarship. I soon discovered how difficult it is to create a high-quality portfolio of one's work. I have been fortunate to experience our process for showcase portfolios from both sides, as a candidate for reappointment and as a peer evaluator. The insights I have gained from reading dozens of my colleagues' portfolios, while sitting on the FRC four times, have certainly directed the composition of my own portfolios. My own painful experience of reading portfolios and trying to sort out what the materials were used for, why, and what the results were, led me to take extra care with the layout of my portfolio. Although I resent having to complete a portfolio every 2 years, each time I begin the process I quickly realize the benefits I receive from reflecting on my recent practices.

Tim Stewart

Reflection

- Why do you think it may be difficult to compile a quality teaching portfolio?
- What are some of the features of a teaching portfolio that appeal to you?

Two metaphors, the *mirror* and the *map*, summarize some of the benefits of assembling a teaching portfolio.

- *Mirror.* The mirror metaphor captures the reflective nature of a portfolio as it allows the teacher to view himself or herself over time. The portfolio contains samples of the teacher's work that illustrate a range of teaching skills and activities. It is usually created with a particular audience and purpose in mind. The focus is thus outward, toward other people, such as a colleague or supervisors. This influences the kinds of things that

are included in the portfolio. The portfolio as mirror allows a teacher to reflect on his or her achievements as a teacher.

- *Map.* The map metaphor captures the idea of creating a plan and setting goals. After reviewing the evidence collected over time, the teacher can set immediate and longer-term goals. This is a process of review and self-assessment and deciding where one has arrived in one's development as a teacher and where one would like to go next. In this sense, the portfolio is like a map.

The following vignette from a teacher in the United States explains why he compiled a showcase portfolio, what he chose to include and why, and what he gained from this process.

Vignette

I have been teaching ESL/EFL/EAP for the past 20 years after having graduated with an M.A. At that time, teaching portfolios were not required, or even talked about. I knew what they were, but no one ever asked me for one, so I had never put one together. Recently, I've read more about them because, as an administrator, I have to find ways of assessing candidates for jobs with our program. I then read where teaching portfolios represent who a teacher is and what he or she has achieved over time. I decided that if I was going to be reading other people's portfolios, I should give this a go myself. I had wanted to see what I had done over the years in terms of teaching and other related work. I started to compile my teaching portfolio. Following what was suggested in the article I read and what suited me, I decided to include the following items:

1. Resume
2. Letters of reference
3. Copies of transcripts
4. Copies of diplomas
5. Beliefs about my teaching
6. Course outlines
7. Student testimonials
8. Copies of materials I wrote
9. Student evaluations

I chose these nine items as I figured these would be an overall representation of who I am as a teacher. It took me about 3 months to put this portfolio together, but I am amazed at what I was able to assemble. I did not realize that I had accomplished so much, especially in the past few years. For example,

I had not realized the vast number of diverse courses I designed and taught successfully in the past few years. Additionally, I learned a lot from reading my student evaluations. For example, I was surprised to see some of them felt that they were not improving in their speaking and writing ability and that I was not correcting them enough. Apart from that, they all seemed satisfied that I was doing a good job. I understand their attitude toward corrections; it was as if they were thinking: "Why can't the teacher give me some magic feedback that will eliminate my writing problems?" I think I have to do a better job of explaining my strategies as a writing teacher. The most challenging aspect of the teaching portfolio for me was writing about my beliefs and values of teaching and learning. I found it very difficult to bring to the surface what I usually do instinctively when I teach. This was a major reflective essay for me, as I had to articulate beliefs that I have but that are not always easy to write down on paper. I really enjoyed putting my portfolio together. I was pleasantly surprised at the breadth and depth of what I have accomplished since I started teaching. Even though it was time-consuming, I hope others compile their teaching portfolios too.

Larry Zwier

Reflection

- Which other components could Larry have included in his portfolio?
- What would you like to include in a portfolio if you decided to assemble one?

As this example illustrates, compiling a teaching portfolio can be a very useful activity because it provides the opportunity to undertake a holistic assessment of one's teaching. It can also provide a rationale for undertaking some of the other activities discussed in this book, such as self-monitoring, journal writing, videotaping a lesson, and peer observation. Before starting a portfolio, however, teachers should be aware of some of the difficulties involved.

One of the most common difficulties reported is that of time (Wheeler, 1993). Assembling a portfolio takes a considerable amount of time and is best viewed as an ongoing long-term endeavor, with new features being added as needed and when they become available. Setting realistic goals and narrowing the contents of the portfolio are important, particularly at the outset. Deciding on the contents of the portfolio can also be problematic. If the portfolio is going to be part of a teacher's appraisal, then the purpose and contents of the portfolio should be discussed with the appraiser. When

appraisal is not involved, discussion with a peer, with a mentor, or with other teachers who have developed portfolios is always helpful.

Nevertheless, we feel that a teaching portfolio can provide a useful opportunity for self-review and for collaboration with colleagues. In addition, a portfolio provides a richer picture of a teacher's strengths and accomplishments than a reswne would, and in the process of compiling the portfolio, goals for further professional development can be identified.

Procedures used in compiling a teaching portfolio

The purposes and audience for a portfolio are crucial in determining what is selected to go into it and how the contents of the portfolio are arranged. Many different kinds of items could be included in a teaching portfolio, but the contents should be selected carefully to ensure that they help create a coherent and effective portfolio and that they provide evidence of the teacher's competency, development, and self-awareness. A portfolio could include lesson plans, anecdotal records, student projects, class newsletters, videotapes, teacher evaluations, and letters of recommendation, but the form and contents of the portfolio will vary depending on its purpose.

An alternative to a paper-based portfolio is an electronic portfolio. An electronic portfolio has the same goals and content as a paper-and-pencil portfolio but presents them through the medium of the computer. It is a multimedia approach that allows the teacher to present the portfolio in a variety of formats, such as audio, video, graphics, and text. Hypermedia links are used to connect each section. The portfolio can be published on the Web and/or on a CD. Basic computer skills are needed, however, including the ability to create word-processing documents and incorporate computer graphics (Costantino & de Lorenzo, 2002).

Contents of a portfolio

The following are examples of the kinds of things that can be considered, though no more than eight to ten items would normally be included.

Evidence of your understanding of subject matter and current developments in language teaching

- A copy of your qualifications.
- A list of courses you have taken related to the areas you teach. For example, if you teach a course on speaking, you could include a list that includes such courses as Phonetics, Phonology, TESOL Methodology, and Second Language Acquisition Theory, to name a few.

- A critique of your school curriculum or languages program and its strengths and weakness. This could include comments on course outlines and tests.
- A critique or review (published or unpublished) of one or more books related to the subjects you teach. For example, if you teach a reading course, you might want to include a review of a book on the reading process and how to teach reading.
- A short essay describing your understanding of areas you teach (e.g., grammar, writing) and the principles you try to implement in your teaching.
- Written comments from a supervisor or colleagues on your expertise and knowledge in particular areas.

Evidence of your skills and competency as a language teacher

- A report by a colleague who visited your class
- Student evaluations
- Lesson plans
- Self-evaluations of lessons you have taught
- Examples of students' work
- A video (and/or audio) of one or more of your lessons
- A report by a supervisor, usually an evaluation
- Samples of assessment procedures you use with your students
- Examples of teaching materials you have prepared
- Photographs of you teaching your class
- Photographs of your classroom with students engaged in a learning activity
- Notes or cards of appreciation from past students
- Student achievements in outside examinations (such as the TOEFL test)
- Student placement success rate in university courses that require English

Your approach to classroom management and organization

- A description of your philosophy of classroom management
- A report by a colleague on how effectively you managed lessons your colleague observed
- Written comments on your management and organizational skills by a supervisor
- An account of critical incidents related to student behavior and how you responded to them
- An account of procedures used for teaching large classes and for using group work

- A video of one of your classes in session
- A diagram of your ideal language classroom
- A student account of your classroom management techniques and effectiveness

Documents showing your commitment to professional development

- A professional development plan for yourself
- A report on other teachers' classes that you have observed
- A report on any teacher group you belong to and your activities in relation to it
- A report on how you think you have developed since you began teaching
- An account of any classroom research you have conducted
- A list of courses and workshops you have taken in recent years
- A list of professional organizations you belong to (e.g., TESOL, IATEFL)
- A report on a conference or workshop you attended
- An annotated list of the books you have read in your area recently
- An account of some journal articles you have read
- A sample of any papers related to language teaching you have written recently for publication or otherwise

Information concerning your relationships with colleagues

- An account of ways in which you have assisted or mentored colleagues
- Letters from colleagues attesting to successful collaborations
- A report about the sense of collegiality you perceive in your school and where you fit in
- A report on ways you have contributed to your colleagues' professional development (e.g., did you present any brown-bag lunch seminars to your colleagues recently? If so, make a summary of this session).

The following vignette outlines an English language teacher's teaching philosophy, prepared for his teaching portfolio.

Vignette

I have a definite philosophy of teaching: I think that all students always come first. If a particular program (or course of action) will benefit them, I will endeavor to carry it out. If it's not going to benefit the students, I will scrap it or play it down. Pupils can learn well if they start liking the subject. To make the students like the subject, first, inject fun and humor; second,

relate it to real-life situations; third, give students a chance to pass in order to build up self-esteem; fourth, acknowledge effort and any improvement.

A teacher should be prepared to experiment with materials and teaching strategies because we don't know what actually works until we have tried different approaches and strategies. I put myself in the students' shoes and introduce to them whatever they could do to earn better grades - check for grammar in comprehension; teach them how to make inferences in comprehension and how to identify relevant points in summary writing.

Victor Ng

Reflection

- How would you characterize your philosophy of teaching?
- What sources do you think influenced the development of your teaching philosophy?

Organizing the contents of the portfolio

Portfolios usually contain a mix of teaching artifacts and written documents, grouped into different sections. As noted, we recommend including eight to ten items in a portfolio, depending on the amount of information included in each section.

The portfolio is not simply a set of documents, however. It is supported by the teacher's explanation of the goals, contents, and meaning of the portfolio as a whole and of the different items within it. This can be achieved through the following means (Costantino & de Lorenzo, 2002):

- *Introductions.* You should open your portfolio with an overview of the portfolio and the rationale for including the items in it. Each section of the portfolio usually contains its own introduction.
- *Artifacts.* Artifacts are the essential elements of a teaching portfolio and include such things as your philosophy of teaching, course outlines, unit and lesson plans, and other typical items.
- *Explanations.* These accompany each artifact in the portfolio and explain briefly what it is and why it is included. They may be a narrative text or simply a caption.
- *Reflections.* The value of a portfolio lies not merely in its contents, but in the meaning its contents have for you. This can be expressed through written reflections that accompany the different artifacts or sections within the portfolio.

- *Conclusion.* You should conclude your portfolio with a reflective essay or commentary in which you review the meaning of the portfolio for you.

The following vignette is an account of how an Australian teacher organized her teaching portfolio.

Vignette

I compiled my teaching portfolio and divided it into four main sections: "Qualifications and introduction," "Who I am as a teacher," "What I teach," and "My professionalism."

Qualifications and introduction

Who I am as a teacher

- My beliefs about my teaching - effective teaching and successful language learning

What I teach

- Sample course outlines
- A completed set of unit materials, including assessment tasks
- Sample lesson plans
- Samples of students' evaluations/feedback of lessons
- A videotape and/or audiotape of me teaching a class with a written description of what I was teaching and my reflection on that class
- Comments from colleagues
- My reflective journal

My professionalism

- My resume
- My professional development plan (in point form)
- Research
- Copies of degrees, certificates, honors, and awards

Lyn May

Reflection

- What items in the categories mentioned here would you include in your teaching portfolio?
- How often do you think you should update your portfolio?

Implementing teaching portfolios

Compiling a teaching portfolio can be useful because it provides the opportunity to undertake a holistic assessment of one's teaching. By compiling a teaching portfolio, a teacher can assess his or her own progress and establish goals for professional development. Deciding on the audience for a portfolio (e.g., a working portfolio or a showcase portfolio) will help to determine what to include in it.

Portfolios have attracted increased interest as an institutional professional development strategy, often as a component of teacher appraisal. If the institution has opted for the use of portfolios, a number of questions need to be addressed.

1. Do teachers understand the nature and purpose of keeping a portfolio? An orientation session in which teachers are given the chance to examine examples of portfolios and discuss how they can be assembled is an important first step.
2. Participating teachers need to be given clear guidelines on what to include and within what time frame.
3. It is crucial to establish the criteria that will be used to assess the contents of a portfolio. Will assessment depend simply on assembling the agreed upon number of items, or will individual items also be assessed? Teachers need to know what they need to do in order to achieve a positive evaluation.

Summary

Compiling a teaching portfolio provides a teacher with an opportunity to document his or her strengths, skills, and accomplishments as a teacher and can also provide a rationale for undertaking some of the other activities discussed elsewhere in this book, such as self-monitoring, journal writing, videotaping a lesson, and peer observation. Assembling a portfolio is best viewed as an ongoing, long-term endeavor, with new features being added as needed and when they become available. Setting realistic goals and narrowing the contents of the portfolio are important, especially at the outset. The process of assembling the items to include in a portfolio can trigger self-appraisal, facilitate review, and help set goals for further development.

Example of a teaching portfolio

The following is an example of a small section of a teaching portfolio an EAP teacher in Singapore was required to compile by the school administration. This example explains how the teacher compiled his portfolio for part of one course he was teaching, Business and Technical Communication.

Teaching portfolio

BUSINESS AND TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

PATRICK GALLO

Contents/Sections

1. Course outline and Web page files
2. Lecture notes
3. Tutorial materials
4. Continual assessment
5. Final assessment
6. Concluding remarks

This course folder includes course materials that I developed since I joined the course team in July 2001. Before each element presented in this folder, I have included a brief introductory paragraph that summarizes what is being presented and my comments on it. This folder highlights those aspects of the course that I had direct control over and those that I had the opportunity to shape with my colleagues into the form they currently take.

Section 1

Course outline and Webpage files

1. Course objectives
2. Course Web pages
 - a. Calendar
 - b. Lecture schedule
 - c. Tutorial schedule
 - d. Topics
 - e. Staff contacts

Section 2

Class notes

1. Lecture 4: *Successful User Manual Writing 1* student handout
2. Lecture 4: PowerPoint slides

3. Lecture 5: *Successful User Manual Writing* 2 student handout
4. Lecture 5: PowerPoint slides
5. Mock Exam Workshop - User Manual Writing

Section 3

Tutorial materials

1. Sample textbook pages
2. Tutorial 4 and 5 guides (from textbook)
3. Lesson plans for each tutorial
4. Supplementary materials linked to various lessons

In July 2001, the course team had just finished their first edition of a course textbook, *Business and Technical Communication for IT Professionals*. This book served as our main text for 200112002. Consequently, the first tutorial guides and related assignments that I produced were based on this version of the user manual writing materials.

Section 4

Continual assessment

1. Pop quizzes for tutorials 4 and 5
2. User manual writing assignment sheets
3. User manual evaluation form

Section 5

Final assessment - user manual questions

Section 6

Concluding remarks

The preceding materials illustrate much of what I have been able to contribute to the course during the past 2 years. Perhaps from these materials you can see that I strive to organize each session I have with my students in a logical and efficient way. I care about presentation and the look of the materials we use. I use computer (and other) technologies and find ways to adapt existing activities into a multimedia environment. I do my best to maintain a spirit of unity with my colleagues who team teach this course with me, while injecting a breath of individuality into my lessons. On the other hand, the hard copies of handouts, lesson plans, and lecture notes do not provide a complete picture of what happens in my lectures or tutorials.

What may not be clear from these materials is my commitment to cooperative learning. In my lectures, and even more in my tutorials, I apply cooperative learning principles as much as I can. If you visit my class, you will see students constantly teaching one another or answering questions in

pairs before displaying their knowledge to me and the whole class. I often apply Kagan's cooperative structures (cooperative learning methods) to the activities presented in the tutorials. Fortunately, before I arrived, many of the assignments were designed as group projects. Yet it is not enough to put students in a group and expect them to function appropriately. Cooperative skills must be explicitly taught and modeled during class. This is something I attempt to do during each tutorial session. Similarly, after group work, it is important to reflect on the process that the group has been through in order to learn what worked well and what could be improved upon for the next group project. Again, this is something I take the time to do in order to maximize my students' learning, not only of the specific writing and presentation skills we teach, but also of interpersonal communication skills and group-work strategies that will benefit them well beyond my classroom.

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