



Promoting a Culture of Teaching: The Teaching Portfolio

Better evaluation of teaching, opportunities for peer feedback and review, more complex representation of classroom instruction—these issues have been at the forefront of faculty dialogues at Stanford in the 1990s. Contributing to this discussion, with its emphasis on how to promote and reward excellence in teaching, is the teaching portfolio. This new resource offers teachers the opportunity to reflect on their classroom practices and enables more realistic evaluation of student learning.

Already at Stanford teaching portfolios have been used to formalize mentoring relationships and deepen peer evaluation. Departments are encouraging TAs to compile them in order to improve their chances on the job market, and a CTL workshop this quarter to aid TAs in preparing them drew over forty graduate students. When a number of TAs and teachers compile dossiers of their teaching, they begin to think consciously about what makes their teaching effective. If reflection becomes the norm, it creates a climate in which discussion of teaching—and thus teaching itself—can flourish.

In the interest of promoting a higher level of discourse about teaching, a “pedagogy of substance,” to use the phrase of Professor Lee Shulman (a leader in the portfolio movement), CTL is devoting an issue to this valuable innovation. Besides examples of Stanford faculty and TAs who are compiling them and the principles guiding their creation and use, this issue includes a list of resources on teaching portfolios and related subjects.

What Is a Teaching Portfolio?

The teaching portfolio is most simply described as a collection of information from students, colleagues, and the teacher’s own files that results in a comprehensive profile of teaching effectiveness. Some view it as an extended teaching resume, serving to balance the extensive documentation of scholarship that candidates for teaching positions or for promotion are expected to supply. Its purpose is not only to offer a body of information for assessment but to serve as a means of reflecting on one’s development as a teacher.

Teaching portfolios are useful for anyone from a beginning teaching assistant to a distinguished professor,

because they can demonstrate every phase of instruction: preparation, lecturing and discussion leading, and learning outcomes. They document the specific achievements of teachers while highlighting their goals and objectives.

Portfolios may be used by candidates as part of their file submitted for tenure, or by TAs entering a job market where candidates are expected to demonstrate evidence of successful teaching. Some schools use teaching portfolios to select candidates for teaching awards. At Stanford, Ph.D. candidates in Spanish and Portuguese must submit portfolios to the Director of the Undergraduate Language Program, Maria-Paz Haro. She then writes a detailed letter of recommendation based on each TA’s self-assessment and assembled materials.

Where teaching portfolios came from . . .

Although newly popular as a way to capture a teacher’s own work, portfolios have been around in fine arts departments and creative writing courses for decades. Recognizing the value of portfolios from their experience with students documenting their accomplishments for final grades, awards, grant applications, graduate admission, or jobs, faculty borrowed the idea of using portfolios to illustrate teaching effectiveness. As students do in collecting and commenting on their work over the course of a quarter, teachers gather an array of materials documenting a process, interpreting their own efforts and those of their students, and presenting a product for feedback and assessment.

The Contents of a Teaching Portfolio

Although to some extent what goes into a portfolio depends on its purpose, most include a list of courses taught, syllabi, sample course materials, a reflective memo on one’s syllabus, evidence of student learning, and various forms of feedback, from colleagues as well as students.

Many instructors include comments on student papers, results of a small group evaluation, letters from students, or a videotape made in the classroom (which may be accompanied by a consultant's report on the videotaped session).

Some dossiers incorporate more extensive course materials, such as problem sets, exercises and examinations, and samples of classroom assessment—one-minute papers or exam evaluations. Teachers developing a new course or an assistant professor teaching one for the first time may include examples of how they assessed students' development, and so include samples of documented problem solutions, process self-analysis, studies of time spent learning, and concept maps. (See *Speaking of Teaching*, Winter 1993: "Do you Know Where Your Students Are? Classroom Assessment and Student Learning.")

The Canadian Association of University Teachers publication *The Teaching Dossier* (Shore) precedes its list of "possible items for inclusion" in a faculty portfolio with the statement, "The dossier should be compiled to make the best possible case for teaching effectiveness." Thus the faculty member's emphasis is likely to be on successes. Because few teachers start out as consistently effective teachers, some, particularly TAs or beginning assistant professors, may choose to show the steps on the way to excellent learning outcomes.

The teaching dossier put together by Richard Gelting, a 1995 Stanford Ph.D. in civil engineering, for example, contains his recommendations for improving a role-play exercise in CE 265, "Sustainable Water Resources Development." Each time the course is offered, students will get the improved version of this simulation of a real problem. Because that is only one of several items in Gelting's section on feedback and assessment, his teaching dossier shows that he is adept at gathering materials, developing a course, evaluating texts, and devising exercises and tests of student learning.

Types of Materials

Materials for a teaching portfolio fall into three main categories:

- An overview, such as the teacher's self-reflective statement of teaching philosophy
- Course materials or work samples, sometimes called "Goals and Techniques in the Classroom"
- Feedback and assessment

Maria-Paz Haro instructs graduate students teaching in the Undergraduate Language Program in Spanish and Portuguese early in their career about what to include in

their portfolios. Besides the list of courses taught, syllabi, sample lesson plans and examinations, she requires course evaluations, a list of prizes received, and evidence of mentoring or supervising first-year TAs. Haro also asks them to include especially interesting work they have done with classes. This special project may be stories or poems written by students, newspapers, debates, a song collection developed for classroom use, or a videotape.

Some dossiers are intended to give a favorable impression of teaching competence, while others are compiled for the purposes of self-evaluation and improvement. No matter which purpose is emphasized, the samples of teaching materials and feedback are always accompanied by commentary—some explanation of teaching methods, that is, the theory behind the practice.

The Canadian teachers' association groups the 49 possible items it suggests into three sections:

• The Products of Good Teaching

- Students' test scores, lab workbooks, creative work and fieldwork reports
- Records of students who go on to major, do honors work, or do graduate work in the field
- Documentary evidence of the effects of teaching on students' career choices

• Material from Oneself

- Descriptive material on current and recent teaching responsibilities and practices, such as availability to students, identification of student difficulties, and use of nonprint materials
- Description of steps taken to evaluate and improve one's teaching, such as exchanging course materials with colleagues from other institutions, reading pedagogy journals, and reviewing new teaching materials

• Information from Others

- Students
- Colleagues
- Other sources

—adapted from Shore

The Reflective Essay

The most important feature of the teaching portfolio is the teacher's narrative of self-assessment, which illuminates both sides of the teaching-learning process. Reflection is built in to the process, for the instructor has selected what

to include and has organized the contents. The next step is to interpret its contents, either by weaving a narrative thread through the sample of lessons, student work, and feedback, or by including a separate essay as introduction or conclusion. The reflective essay thus makes the principles of selection and the philosophical basis of the teaching materials apparent.

Self-assessment is not simply the capstone of the teaching portfolio, for reflection begins as soon as the teacher starts collecting materials. Mark Gonnerman, writing his dissertation in Religious Studies, has been putting copies of materials and feedback into a box, making notes interpreting them as the papers accumulate. He has learned from graduate students who put portfolios together after the fact that it is difficult to work retroactively; so he regularly writes down what he did and why he changed methods or materials.

Gonnerman says that he has already learned through reflecting on his syllabi in various incarnations that he is a “less is more” kind of teacher. One impetus to this realization was his participation in a teaching workshop at Claremont College, sponsored by the Society for Values in Higher Education. In presenting the various incarnations of his syllabus for a course on American transcendentalism and explaining how the course evolved, he saw that what worked best was a very few texts studied intensively. Thus his course in the summer session in 1996, “Introduction to Religious Studies,” will focus on only three texts.

Much as instructors often ask students to keep journals of ideas that can lead to essays or research projects, the teacher’s journals can serve as raw material for the reflective essay. Teachers can keep track of what worked and what puzzled students, and they can note positive feedback from colleagues who visit as well as from students.

Assessing Teaching Effectiveness

Teaching portfolios demonstrate teaching effectiveness in two different ways: (1) by supplementing student evaluations with other forms of feedback, and (2) by including examples of student work that represent the products of good teaching. As Peter Elbow says, “In teaching, as in writing, it is possible to be good in very different ways. A teacher might be warm or cold, organized or disorganized, easy or hard—and still be good.” Standardized forms in which students assess teaching don’t generally allow for these variations in style. They are known to “measure” a complex set of interactions along a continuum from poor to excellent, whereas portfolios enable a variety of responses and evaluative modes.

For example, the portfolio might include a course evaluation book compiled by a student committee, results of the instructor’s own midterm or end-of-term questionnaire, interview data, or feedback from alumni and employers of students. Colleagues who have observed classes or evaluated the syllabus or other materials developed by the teacher

often respond with reports that can be included. When the course that the instructor has developed or taught regularly is a prerequisite for others, those who teach these subsequent courses can comment on how well the students have been prepared.

Besides student essays, honors theses, creative work, and fieldwork or lab reports the teacher has guided, the portfolio can include a record of students who go on to become majors or to do graduate work in the field.

Peer Review and Mentoring

Teaching portfolios inherently have a strong collaborative component, for colleagues may help in compiling them—formally or informally. Besides reports of classroom observations made as part of the three-year or tenure review, tenure-track faculty may request letters from colleagues in their area with whom they have developed a course or team-taught. A TA’s portfolio should contain letters from the senior course assistant or head TA in a lecture course with sections or labs, as well as from faculty advisers and mentors.

Mentoring programs also lend themselves to developing teaching portfolios. As part of the AAHE Peer Evaluation Project, the English Department offers new assistant professors the chance to work with a senior member of the department throughout their first years. Mentors provide counsel on their teaching as well as on their research and service to the department and university. Professors Ronald Rebholz and David Halliburton have been part of the project; the latter is currently working with a junior faculty member, who has the opportunity to emerge from the collaboration with a comprehensive teaching portfolio. Rebholz, who put together a course portfolio and videotaped a lecture on Milton that he viewed with faculty colleagues, was so convinced of the value of the process that he believes the mentoring program would be stronger if the teaching portfolio were required rather than simply recommended.

The AAHE Peer Evaluation Project is based on the idea that peer review and teaching portfolios are essential to the cultivation of a thoughtful discussion about what good teaching is and how it can be enhanced. Through exchanging plans, strategies, and results, teachers create a marketplace for ideas about teaching as well as scholarship. Authors of the AAHE monograph *The Teaching Portfolio* call the usually private and individual classroom preparation and conducting of classes “the scholarship in teaching,” which they believe should be brought out in the open.

Another benefit of portfolios is that their widespread use would enable faculty to take the responsibility for evaluating teaching—not only their own but that of their colleagues. Faculty are on record as saying they have more confidence in forms of assessment of their teaching

that do more than rate their ability to manage a class. Because portfolios enable faculty to assess their own and others' effectiveness, improvement—of learning as well as of teaching—is a more likely result.

Departmental Teaching Portfolios

An outgrowth of individual teachers' collections of teaching materials and their commentary on their effectiveness is departmental teaching portfolios. These are similar to a teaching library, but because they include more than books—for example, World Wide Web sites, videotapes, and transparencies—they are more like an archive or depository library. The departmental faculty's own syllabi, exams, student projects, and the like thus become a resource for new tenure-track professors and TAs. An essential component of this departmental portfolio is the contributor's assessment of what worked and what didn't, and other reflection on changes from one year to the next, such as the way TAs were used in leading sections or labs.

To the authors of *The Teaching Portfolio*, "A special advantage of such a local collection is that it deals with issues of standards not by setting up a list of general criteria but by putting forward exemplars of good practice." This seems the most appropriate way to express the advantages of a departmental resource to develop and

improve offerings, not only for new faculty teaching their first courses but to initiate dialogue among experienced faculty returning to the core courses in their discipline.

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CTL is willing to consult with anyone wishing to compile a teaching portfolio. Contact Fred Stout, Coordinator of TA Training, 723-6487, fstout@leland, or Jack Probstko, Associate Director, 725-0127, ea.jxp@forsythe.

Funding Faculty Initiatives to Improve Teaching

Professor Robert Weisberg, Vice Provost for Faculty Recruitment and Development, encourages departments to apply for funds to promote teaching excellence. (Individuals should discuss ideas with their department chairs since proposals must come through the chairs.) Applications should contain a detailed, informal narrative describing the programs and tasks that will be undertaken and the means by which the money would be allotted. Proposals may result in new mentorship arrangements or fund a faculty member who will develop a model of a teaching portfolio and work with colleagues to try it out. For further details, consult Vice Provost Weisberg's December 5 memo to department chairs.

• FOR MORE INFORMATION •

Anderson, Erin, ed. *Campus Use of the Teaching Portfolio: Twenty-Five Profiles*. AAHE Teaching Initiative. Washington, DC: AAHE, 1993.

Cashin, William E. *Defining and Evaluating College Teaching*. IDEA Paper No. 21. Manhattan, KS: Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development, Kansas State University, 1989.*

Edgerton, Russell, Patricia Hutchings, and Kathleen Quinlan. *The Teaching Portfolio: Capturing the Scholarship in Teaching*. AAHE Teaching Initiative. Washington, DC: AAHE, 1991.

Seldin, Peter. *The Teaching Portfolio: A Practical Guide to Improved Performance and Promotion/Tenure Decisions*. Bolton, MA: Anker, 1991.

Shore, B.M., et al. *The Teaching Dossier: A Guide to Its Preparation and Use*. Rev. ed. Montreal: Canadian Association of University Teachers, 1986.

Shulman, Lee S. "A Union of Insufficiencies: Strategies for Teacher Assessment in a Period of Educational Reform." *Educational Leadership* 46.3 (November 1988): 36-41.

WWW Sites

For back issues of *Speaking of Teaching*, a portfolio handout called "Documenting Your Teaching," and other teaching resources, go to CTL's site: <http://www-ctl.stanford.edu>

For an issue on teaching portfolios, see the Penn State Instructional Development Program Newsletter: http://www.psu.edu/academic/ue/ID_Nov93.html

The AAHE site offering information about its peer evaluation project is <http://www.aahepeer.iupui.edu/BULLETIN.html>

Annalisa Crannell, assistant professor of math at Franklin & Marshall College, tells how she compiled a teaching portfolio in an essay reprinted from the *Notices of the American Mathematical Society*. It's at <http://www.ams.org/committee/profession/crannell.html>

* To order IDEA papers, see <http://unix.dce.ksu.edu/dce/maincntr/idea/centr023.html#Publications>