

*Creating a*

# *Teaching Portfolio*

*A  
Guide  
for  
Graduate  
Students*

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In today's academic world, it pays for graduates (and faculty) to be cognizant of any developments that can give them a competitive edge. Increasingly, the strongest candidates are sending a teaching portfolio—a personalized collection of materials that documents their teaching effectiveness—along with their resume. While many graduates are aware of the need for such a portfolio, they are often confused as to what exactly a portfolio is and what it should contain. The aim of this workshop is to answer these questions and to provide a hands-on session that will enable you to create your own personalized portfolio.

**ACTIVITY 1: What is a teaching Portfolio?**

Peter Seldin ( 1991, p-3) says of a teaching portfolio, "It describes documents and materials which collectively suggest the scope and quality of a teacher's performance."

What would *you* like your teaching portfolio to do for you?

**ACTIVITY 2: Where do I start?**

In order to begin developing your teaching portfolio, consider the following questions. It often helps to answer them with reference either to (a) the course you have enjoyed teaching the most, or (b) the course you have taught most often.

1. What major claims would you make about your teaching? (What sets you apart as a teacher? What do you think your most important characteristics are as a teacher? What are your key teaching goals?) Try to limit yourself to three only.

a.

b.

c.

2. What types of instructional methods, materials, and techniques do you use to support your teaching goals? (Include any that are particularly innovative.)

a.

b.

c.

## POSSIBLE DATA SOURCES

Seldin (1991) lists the kinds of materials that one might include in a teaching portfolio. For the purposes of this workshop, we have elaborated on those materials that are particularly relevant to graduate teaching assistants. The specific items you select will depend on your particular teaching assignment and activities. It will also depend on your potential (or that of your supervisor) to generate opportunities for collecting materials suitable for inclusion in your portfolio. Such opportunities might include guest lectures in classes and doctoral exam questions that ask you to discuss how you can combine your research and teaching interests.

The real secret of assembling a successful portfolio is knowing whom to ask for what. Some ideas for sources of data are given below. As you read through them, check those materials that you would be able to include in your teaching portfolio and star those you had not previously thought of.

### DATA FROM ONESELF

Self-analysis and self-reflection are far too often overlooked in the assessment of teaching and learning, yet they are central not only to the processes of assessing teaching, but also of improving it. Thus they are an essential part of your teaching portfolio.

TAs can provide their own perspective on virtually every aspect of instruction. Self-reports should be primarily descriptive as opposed to evaluative—what were you trying to do, why, how, and what was the result? Consequently, these documents will more easily reflect development than those from other sources. Self-reports should also be compared with data from other sources. Because feedback that provides new information is most likely to produce change, it is by virtue of such comparisons that personal growth and improvement occur. Data from oneself might include:

- a list of courses taught, with brief descriptions of course content, teaching responsibilities, and student information
- a statement of philosophy of teaching and factors that have influenced that philosophy
- examples of course material prepared and any subsequent modifications that were made to accommodate unanticipated student needs
- a sample syllabus or lesson plan
- a record of teaching discoveries and subsequent changes made to courses regularly taught
- a description of efforts to improve teaching (e.g., participating in seminars and workshops, reading journals on teaching, reviewing new teaching materials for possible application, using instructional development services, and contributing to a professional journal of teaching in your discipline)
- evidence of reputation as a skilled teacher, such as awards, invitations to speak, and interviews
- personal reflections on your growth and change as a teacher (including awards won and indicating future teaching promise)

### DATA FROM OTHERS

Obviously, different people can provide different kinds of information about your teaching. For example, it is probably counterproductive and inappropriate to ask students about the breadth and completeness of a TA's content knowledge since, from their point of view, such expertise should be a given. The more obvious and appropriate judges of this information would be department colleagues, such as fellow TAs,

## POSSIBLE DATA SOURCES cont.

supervising faculty, and other instructors. Likewise, such colleagues are usually not good judges of whether an individual is prepared for class, arrives on time, or is available for office hours. Clearly, getting the right kinds of input from each group of individuals is what will give your portfolio its strength and depth. Accordingly, in the sections below, we summarize some of the data different sources can provide.

### *Students*

As the immediate beneficiaries of teaching, students are in an ideal position to report and comment on a number of variables, such as which instructional strategies helped them learn the most and whether the TA came prepared to class, was available during office hours, or provided useful comments on papers. Other data that only students can report involve any change in their level of interest as a result of taking the course, how much the course challenged them, and whether they felt comfortable asking questions. The most common ways of obtaining student feedback about these aspects of teaching include:

- interviews with students after they have completed the course
- informal (and perhaps unsolicited) feedback, such as letters or notes from students
- systematic summaries of student course evaluations—both open-ended and restricted choice ratings
- honors received from students, such as winning a Distinguished TA Award

Other materials often referred to in the literature on teaching portfolios are the "products of good teaching." In a sense, these are really a subspecies of the broader category "data from students" and might include:

- examples of the TA's comments on student papers, tests, and assignments
- pre- and post-course examples of students' work, such as writing samples, laboratory workbooks or logs, creative work, and projects or fieldwork reports
- testimonials of the effect of the course on future studies, career choice, employment, or subsequent enjoyment of the subject

### *Colleagues*

Colleagues within the department/school are best suited to make judgments about course content and objectives, the TA's collegiality, and student preparedness for subsequent courses. Departmental/school colleagues, both faculty and other TAs, can provide analyses and testimonials that serve as a measure of:

- mastery of course content
- ability to convey course content and objectives
- suitability of specific teaching methods and assessment procedures for achieving course objectives
- commitment to teaching as evidenced by expressed concern for student learning
- commitment to and support of departmental/school instructional efforts
- ability to work with others on instructional issues

This last item is particularly relevant for TAs, who often must coordinate their efforts with both faculty and other TAs. Data from colleagues could include: \* reports from classroom observations by faculty or fellow TAs

- statements from those who teach other sections of the same course or courses for which the TA's course is a prerequisite
- evidence of contributions to course development, improvement, and innovation
- evidence of help given to fellow TAs on teaching, such as sharing course materials
- invitations to teach for others, including those outside the department

**ACTIVITY 3: What might I include?**

What types of evidence do you currently have (or could you collect in the future) in order to demonstrate your major claims?

a.

b.

c.

**ACTIVITY 4: How do I select and present the material?*****A. Selection***

Clearly you cannot put all the materials you have collected in a large box and send them "as is" to an unsuspecting department chair or school dean. Before you engage in the necessary process of selection, consider the following questions:

1. Why are you creating a teaching portfolio?
  - departmental/school funding or teaching assignment decisions
  - job/grant application
  - self-analysis or reflection
2. Who is your audience?
3. What is the overall argument you wish to make?
4. What are the norms as to length and depth of a graduate teaching portfolio in your department/school/discipline?

***B. Arrangement and Presentation of Components***

An graduate teaching portfolio is, and indeed *should* be, highly personal. There is, therefore, no specifically recognized format. In the most general sense, such a portfolio is likely to contain a short reflective narrative followed by an appendix of supporting documentation. Beyond this, selection and arrangement should be done so as to best reflect the argument you wish to make (for example, that you should be selected for the job, or be given departmental funding to teach a course). Take a few minutes now to begin planning your portfolio. Try using the **ORGANIZATIONAL MATRIX** to help you.

1. *Reflective narrative*—This key piece of your portfolio includes the major claims you wish to state about your teaching, and indicates how these claims support the case you are making. You will need to use specific examples which narrate your claims and give them flavor. For this you can draw ON THE DATA FROM ONESELF section of ACTIVITY 3.
2. *Supporting materials / data / documents*—These elements are used to illustrate the claims and examples in your reflective narrative, and hence to support your overall argument. For this you can draw mostly, though not exclusively, on the DATA FROM OTHERS section of ACTIVITY 3. You might include, for example, a table of standardized student evaluations, as well as a sample lesson plan or syllabus. Supporting materials are most conveniently located in appendices. They need to be carefully selected so as to not be too lengthy (just pick the clearest example to support your point), and should be arranged and labeled for the convenience of the reader. Points made in the narrative should be referenced to specific pages or parts of the appendices if at all possible.

***C. Checking your Portfolio for Balance***

Once your matrix is complete, and before you write your final draft, check your portfolio for balance. In particular, make sure that the "data from others" comes from multiple sources (students as well as colleagues).

**ORGANIZATIONAL MATRIX**

<p><b>Major Teaching Claim</b></p> <p>Source: <i>Data from Oneself</i></p>	<p><b>Specific Narrative Example of Claim</b></p> <p>Source: <i>Data from Oneself</i></p>	<p><b>Supporting Data for Appendices</b></p> <p>Source: <i>Data from Others</i></p>
<p>EXAMPLE-I encourage students to appreciate alternative viewpoints.</p>	<p>I always include an in-class debate over a controversial topic (e.g. XXX) in my classes. In these debates students are assigned a role and asked to argue from a perspective other than their own.</p>	<p>* my class outline for the debate on XXX * student testimonials from my written evaluations</p>

**ACTIVITY 4: Getting feedback from others**

Does your portfolio make the strongest case it can for your application, and does it reflect you as a person? As is the case for teaching in general, the best portfolios are those that are constantly revised and updated. Input from colleagues and friends can be invaluable in this process.

Begin now by breaking into small groups. Individual members of your group should briefly explain in turn the overall message they are trying to convey in their portfolio, and the materials they intend to use to support that message. (Sharing your matrix with others can be helpful in this process.) Other members should then make suggestions to strengthen the speaker's case.

What suggestions do colleagues in the workshop have for strengthening *your* portfolio?

a.

b.

c.

**OPTIONAL ACTIVITY: Putting your portfolio on the web**

Increasingly graduate students are making an electronic version of their teaching portfolio available on the web under password protection. While this is certainly an optional activity, if you are comfortable with electronic media you can probably appreciate the additional flexibility the electronic portfolio offers. Graduate students are often excited by this new format which enables them to present nonlinear ideas, and to adapt their portfolio much more easily for different audiences.

Take a moment to think about the additional possibilities an electronic portfolio might afford you, now or in the future.

## REFERENCES

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

Describes the current form and use of teaching portfolios in 25 varied U.S. college contexts. Includes details of standardized forms and reflections on portfolio use from the institutions concerned.

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

Cashin argues for more comprehensive evaluation of teaching that considers a wider range of information from a variety of sources. Although he does not specifically discuss teaching portfolios, he establishes a useful guide for assembling one by defining seven aspects of teaching and discussing the most appropriate sources of information about each.

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

A good place to get started with background information. Gives detailed examples of how teachers demonstrate and reflect on changes in their teaching using examples of student work.

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

Building on Shulman (1988), Seldin argues that writing a teaching portfolio should be a collaborative effort. Presents five key steps for creating a portfolio compiled from previous research on the topic. In many ways a seminal work and a good place to get started. Because Seldin focuses on faculty, however, teaching assistants will need to extrapolate to their own situation.

Seldin, Peter. *Successful Use of Teaching Portfolios*. Bolton, MA: Anker, 1993.

Responds to the requests from those interested in creating a portfolio who would like some concrete examples. Seldin extends his first work by showcasing examples from nine different institutions nationally.

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

One of the key original reference pieces for those working in the area of teaching portfolio development. This work contains a list of 49 types of items that might be included in a portfolio. A good source of ideas for additional materials, although not all apply to graduate students.

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.

Makes a good case for the use of portfolios and suggests they reflect both the teacher's efforts and the input of mentors or peers. Uses reference to the film *Stand and Deliver* (about a successful teacher) to illustrate his points.