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# Recording the past to prepare for the future: the role of the teaching portfolio

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**Abstract:** *This paper discusses the role of the portfolio in relation to teaching in the higher education sector. As well as evidencing experience and achievements it is argued that the portfolio can be an important tool to support reflection and increased understanding. Underpinned by relevant scholarly literature, the paper draws on the practice of using portfolios as part of the Induction Programme for new staff at Deakin University since 2001 and for promotion since 2002 as well as a trial of electronic portfolios. Commencing with indicators of the level of interest in portfolios, the author characterises teaching portfolios and explains why they are used from both an individual and institutional point of view. The theoretical basis for portfolios and the experience elsewhere are set alongside the practice at Deakin as the author explores some of the challenges for those who prepare and assess portfolios.*

**Keywords:** *teaching portfolios, reflection, credentialling*

As Klenowski (2002) contends, although still in its infancy the use of portfolios for learning and assessment is becoming internationally popular, being found in all phases of education and professional development. Wolf (2000) claims they have become “a regular feature in many educational programmes and organizations at national, state, district, school and university levels” (p. 1). A recent mailout from Pearson Education under the banner “demonstrate your true teaching ability with a Teaching Portfolio” offers three publications on the subject, and the publisher’s use of this topic as the lead is an indication of its perceived relevance. Not surprisingly, the HERDSA scheme for the professional recognition and development of teaching in higher education is premised on portfolios. A telling indication of growing awareness is the rapid development of web sites with some connection to teaching portfolios: 181,005 at the time of writing (April, 2003) using ‘Google’ as the search engine and 96,008 when the search is refined to university teaching portfolios. Another indicator is the increased interest in presenting and discussing portfolios at conferences - for example, the 2002 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference of the International Consortium of Educational Development in Higher Education [ICED] conference in Perth which brought together academics from across the world to present on this issue. The large number of delegates who chose to attend this session, and the lively discussion, point to considerable interest in this topic within the sector as well as a strong sense that there is much yet to learn.

## Sources of data

The author has been involved in the introduction of portfolios to her university as part of promotion applications and also as part of the Induction (now Orientation) Programme for new staff which she co-ordinates. As well, she led a trial of electronic portfolios that was completed at the start of 2003. This paper draws on the scholarly literature to contextualise practice in these differing contexts and on data collected to inform internal reports, including face-to-face discussions with staff and contact by email and telephone. The author reviewed all the portfolios submitted as part of the Induction Programme (a total of 70 over two years) and had access to portfolios being submitted as part of promotions in three faculties (a further 7).

## What is a teaching portfolio?

A decade ago writers such as Edgerton, Hutchings, and Quinlan (1991) asserted that a definition for a teaching portfolio does not exist. Moreover, Arter and Spandel (1992) contended the word had become a popular buzz word with lack of clarity in terms of meaning or implication. Since then a now quite extensive literature characterises portfolios in a range of ways, with differing emphases and forms. For my work I have found it useful to describe teaching portfolios as:

- (1) selective and structured collections of information about a teacher's practice;
- (2) gathered for specific purposes and showing/evidencing one's accomplishments;
- (3) in the context of one's teaching philosophy/ethos.

Fundamentally, a teaching portfolio should demonstrate beliefs about a vision of teaching and learning by providing evidence of practice and reflection on that practice, thus stimulating as appropriate, new or revised approaches. Such a portfolio goes beyond a summation of achievements in which the context is the driving force for, as Murray (1995) recognises, the use to which the portfolio will be put will guide the way in which the portfolio is compiled. In this regard it is important to differentiate between the collection of the data/evidence from which material will be selected, and the portfolio itself where that evidence is incorporated and used for an identified specific purpose or purposes. A portfolio is an iterative document:

a collection of artifacts accompanied by a reflective narrative that not only helps the learner to understand and extend learning, but invites the reader of the portfolio to gain insight about the learning and the learner (Porter & Cleland, 1995, p. 154).

## The rationale for keeping a teaching portfolio

While individuals have their own reasons for keep a teaching portfolio, among the most commonly cited (see, e.g., James, 2001; Klenowski, 2002; Seldin, 1993; Wolf, 2000) are:

- To become a more effective teacher (and hence improve learning) as the process of compiling the portfolio provides a structure and opportunity for self-reflection and discussions with others that is based on documented episodes of teaching.
- To understand more fully the complexities of teaching and learning by close observation over a reasonable period of time and across a range of settings.
- To contribute to review discussions.

- For credentialing for tenure, promotion and employment.

For increasing numbers of staff where institutions mandate the presentation of a teaching portfolio for reasons such as promotion, tenure and review, the impetus tends to be one of compliance to external demands. From this basis, for those developing portfolios the experience should lead to an enhanced understanding of themselves as educators and they may be motivated to continue with some form of portfolio beyond the immediate need. For those who view teaching as a scholarly activity (see, for example, Boyer, 1990), it is natural to seek avenues to document, reflect and to share that experience. For many, this is part of their personal professional growth. Where the audience is oneself, pleasure and reward can be derived from charting one's professional work and development.

The reason for teaching is learning and it is a corollary that any improvement in teaching should also enhance learning for both students and staff. Such reflection helps all those involved review, question, discuss, and understand the interwoven and reciprocal nature of all aspects of teaching and learning. As Seldin (1993, p. 13) argues:

The very process of collecting and sifting documents and materials that reflect a professor's teaching, gets them thinking about what has worked and what hasn't in the classroom. And why they do what they do in the classroom. It forces them to review their activities, strategies and plans for the future.

### **The process and desired outcome**

A teaching portfolio evolves and so the process is an integral element. Wolf, Whinery, and Hagerty (1995, p. 32) argue that the teaching portfolio "can promote growth by providing a textured picture of teaching and learning **as they unfold over time** (my emphasis), enabling teachers to examine, discuss, and reflect on their performance". It is, as Klenowski (2002, p. 3) asserts, "an educative process in itself" as it entails ongoing learning as the person concerned develops important insights, skills, strategies, dispositions and understandings of continuing learning. As the most effective portfolios show development over time and across contexts and reveal reflection and the ways in which this has led to growth (and here process and outcome are inextricably linked), there is an implied necessity for the process to be undertaken over a reasonable period. Certainly, having a broad-based collection of material from which to draw requires consistent gathering of data and regular reviewing to organise the material and control its size for the portfolio is not an archive. As Porter and Cleland (1995) recognise, portfolios allow individuals to use them as they understand them and, as the learner grows, so, too, do the capabilities of the portfolio.

Hence the developmental process needs to be both recognised and sustained with the provision of opportunities and support for those preparing portfolios to evaluate their growth. Once the raw data are reconstituted as a portfolio, the process of articulating criteria for selection, the revisiting of the material and the actual selection, the noting of patterns and recognition of apparent anomalies and aberrant areas, the highlighting of areas of perceived strong significance and the use of these data to evidence the realisation of one's teaching philosophy are all important aspects of such growth. As staff at the University of Texas are advised (Centre for Effective

Teaching & Learning, 1998) “reviewing and analyzing the information is what can make the process of creating and revising a portfolio an instructive and rewarding experience”.

These processes go a long way towards the desired outcome: the presentation of a portfolio (whether it be paper-based or digital) that provides compelling evidence in a thoughtful context. Well presented, but not unduly glossy, it will be judiciously assembled and meaningfully interpreted. While concise, it will be comprehensive and representative. Fundamentally, it will fit the purpose(s) it is intended to meet and, through its interpretation of presented evidence, reveal the scholarly educator, the effective teacher.

## **The practice**

### ***Evidencing teaching***

While a recognised necessity, and one that is growing with more overt measures of accountability, conventionally academics have found it difficult to evidence their effectiveness as teachers. James (2001, p. 1) claims in ‘strongly advising’ his university’s academics to develop a teaching portfolio:

[w]hile the documentation of a research career is a relatively straightforward exercise, many academics are less sure about how to describe their teaching history and how to present evidence of their effectiveness as a teacher. One reason is that research achievements can be listed by following simple conventions, but this is less true of teaching. Capturing a teaching career in a succinct summary for the purposes of a curriculum vitae is challenging.

“Challenging”, certainly, and, for many staff, documenting effectiveness as a teacher remains an elusive goal. Interviews I have undertaken with staff over many years reveal that they tend to struggle to articulate a clear teaching philosophy/ethos and, as reflected especially by promotion applications, there is likely to be a paucity of evidence of the way philosophy is translated into action. Frequently, detailed resumes list achievements and experiences but often they remain at the level of statement or description and are not interpreted. Further, while student feedback is usually sought and incorporated, there tends to be a lack of connection between the data and either the philosophy or outcomes. Not unreasonably, or surprisingly, there is a propensity to stay with triumphs or, at least, omit feedback that is clearly negative. However, where staff can evidence how they have successfully introduced strategies in response to negative feedback, and how they have grown in understanding as a consequence, they also demonstrate their effectiveness as educators. Participants in the Induction Programme have been advised that recognition of weaker areas, with a thoughtful response and review of any strategies introduced, is likely to be considered a strength. For staff involved in submitting portfolios in other contexts (such as promotion) there is less security about how such material will be viewed.

Glassick, Taylor Huber, and Maeroff (1997) claim that there has long been agreement that the documentation of teaching should be more imaginative, drawing upon multiple types and sources of evidence. They recognise the role of the portfolio in this regard but prudently express concern that such creativity, with the possible expansion of documentation possibilities, can place unduly onerous demands and that there is “the potential for a lack of selectivity and coherence” (p. 39).

Comments from staff, as well as the actual portfolios, show that it is much easier to pile up material than it is to sort, cull and think about it and actually document that thinking process. Almost all staff indicated that, once alerted to the need and value of recording and retaining 'evidence', if it were not for the need to prepare a portfolio, for whatever purpose, such items would remain unvisited.

*If I hadn't had to prepare the portfolio for Induction I would never have made the effort to sort through the stuff I collected and make sense of it all. The portfolio needs to stay at the heart of the programme – it is just so valuable.*

Consequently, the more enthusiastic the 'collector', the richer the data there is to draw from. But, where this remains essentially an *ad hoc* collection of things that have value and appeal for an individual, its message, until it is organised in a coherent or conceptual fashion, is likely to be difficult or even impossible, for others to interpret and evaluate.

### **Electronic portfolios**

Electronic portfolios, where records can be readily searched and retrieved and where (re)organisation is quick and easy, appear attractive. Such electronic tools have a role in management and customisation, but the fact that any immediately incorporated data must be digital is restrictive for staff in traditional contexts. Where staff have a considerable collection of paper-based material it is a significant mindshift to work electronically in terms of capturing evidence. However, because recording activities, experiences and discussion and then reflecting on these is increasingly likely to be handled using a word-processor, the computer allows digital links to provide prompts to other documents. The web's power to open this information to a global audience for purposes such as employment should not be discounted. But, irrespective of how 'user-friendly' a software package is in supporting portfolios, and that is an essential element, unless the person preparing the portfolio understands the need to use the captured data in a meaningful way and can provide the thoughtful interpretation and contextualisation, the result will be disappointing.

### **Offering support to those preparing portfolios**

In the Induction Programme, and for promotion, support for those preparing portfolios was given in terms of written material, with optional face-to-face workshops, and individual telephone and email queries were responded to. Personal communication with the author indicated that this support paid dividends in terms of less stressed staff who also felt they could compile more assured portfolios. However, some staff indicated that initially they thought they knew what was involved and felt comfortable with the process (and so chose not to attend the optional sessions) but close to the deadline for submission they discovered difficulties. Reviewing the portfolios suggested that for some staff who sought no assistance there was a lack of insight and knowledge to recognise where there were problems. This has led to a decision to provide further opportunities to discuss portfolios for applicants for promotion and to increase the time devoted to them at the compulsory first induction session for new staff.

### **Assessing portfolios**

Reports at the 2002 ICED conference, as well as our experience, suggest that it cannot be assumed that staff (many, if not most, having not had the experience of compiling a portfolio) are comfortable with dealing with such different documentation and have the necessary

understanding of what is involved. The discussions with promotions committees the first time portfolios were used indicated variable understanding of what was involved and of the differing views of what was desirable. Staff involved in the Induction Programme were given the opportunity to negotiate how they wanted their portfolios assessed (only one person responded) and they were also given the option of receiving written feedback from the two people most closely involved with the Programme. In both years only about one-third sought such feedback. While many of the staff members wrote back, indicating how much they valued these comments, this was one aspect of envisaged development that was forfeited for the majority. In this regard (with a few notable exceptions) there was discernible correlation between those who had taken a minimalist approach and the decision to receive feedback. However, in the Induction Programme (as distinct from promotion) it has been consistently stressed that the portfolio is for the individual staff member and their assessment of its value and usefulness is fundamentally important.

### ***An opportunity or an imposition***

Discussion with academics who are involved in portfolio preparation suggests that for educators who routinely seek to document their work as a guide to reflection and exploration to assist their development, the opportunity to recast this as a portfolio has great value. At its most basic, recognising moments and material that may be captured as part of the bank of evidence is likely to make the practitioner more alert and self-aware and, where this is a shared endeavour, more responsive to the ideas of others. Where the material is annotated, in a journal-style manner, and revisited over time with additional experiences upon which to draw, the reflective nature of the work is almost inevitably greatly strengthened because the process itself prompts and guides.

As already noted, some people undertake portfolios through compulsion as it is mandated centrally as part of a university's activities. While it may be hoped that the experience itself will prove of value and encourage such staff to continue the process - and our experience indicates this can be so - some will resent what they regard as an imposition. The pressures of normative academic work can quite readily become a rationalisation for a failure to devote time to portfolio development. Clearly, for a significant number of new staff members at Deakin (8 of 45 in 2001, and 9 of 42 in 2002) other activities were perceived as being more important. This is reflected in the following comment by a Head of School:

*The one negative aspect (of the Induction Programme) was a perception that the teaching portfolio was felt to actually exacerbate work pressures when attempting to meet university deadlines for things like completing their marking.*

Many staff did not work on their portfolios consistently throughout the year so, not surprisingly, they found its preparation difficult and onerous when the deadline approached for its submission. Rather than the intended stimulus to reflection and professional development, the task became a chore and an easy-to-relegate priority. It would, however, be an oversimplification to assume that all those who did not submit a portfolio failed to recognise its value:

*I am writing to apologise for not submitting my Teaching-Learning Portfolio as I had intended. It has been my desire to try to do this and do it well, as I recognise the educational benefit of reflective practice and of the Induction program that you have offered throughout 2002. However, I have been unable to complete this in time, and feel*

*that submitting what I have done, and rushing to complete the other sections that I need to do, would be of little value to my professional development and would undermine the objectives of the programme itself. I would be very grateful if you would allow me to complete the programme in 2003.*

Certainly there were those who conformed to the requirements in a minimal way and provided little evidence of reflection and growth, mainly, it can be surmised, because the requisite time had not been devoted to the activity. Undeniably preparing a portfolio neither suits everyone, nor is it the only way to achieve such purposes as have already been discussed, but it is of concern when staff indicate they are not really interested in exploring their teaching - “*I have nothing further to learn about teaching*” being a memorable comment from a newly appointed staff member to the Faculty of Education!

Because a significant number of those who struggled with both the concept and the development of portfolios in the Induction Programme were recently appointed staff from non-English speaking countries working in the Sciences, our experience suggests that portfolio writing tends to suit those involved in the more discursive disciplines and who have developed skills in English language writing. Such cultural differences need to be taken into account more fully. While proficiency in the language of the institution is seen as a reasonable expectation, those supporting and assessing portfolios need to accept different styles and approaches.

Although making the provision of a portfolio an option for Induction, as it is presently for promotion, has considerable attraction, our experience indicates that many are surprised by the value they gain from the exercise – one they readily admit they would not have undertaken voluntarily.

*Despite my initial horror at the thought, I actually really enjoyed putting the portfolio together. I was amazed at how much I had actually done this year!*

## **Conclusion**

There is a pervasive impression that the academy is increasingly a place where multiple pressures and demands have to be balanced. In such a context the ongoing collection of evidence, its analysis and thoughtful consideration, and then its refinement and organisation as part of a portfolio for a given reason at a given time can readily seem an impost. One solution found in the use of portfolios at Deakin University is to explore with staff how the same activity can have multiple positive outcomes for their work and for their professional development. This is well illustrated by the following comment from a member of the 2002 Induction Programme:

*Thank you for the feedback. It is appreciated. I have already prepared some new material and notes for my portfolio, which I will add in when I receive it in the internal mail. I am currently also developing my teacher web site and intend to include in it, some material from my portfolio such as my teaching ethos and objectives. I think that some of my students would be interested to read such things. I will have my portfolio in hand when I attend interviews for promotion next year and believe it will be a good central point for me in which to concentrate records of my accomplishments.*

For the Induction Programme, staff have been encouraged to be central actors in the review and evaluation of their work; to see the portfolio as a means of self-expression in the context of their professional role as tertiary educators. For those who share this interpretation it is natural to use the portfolio in many ways and to share it with those who have an interest in such areas.

Many staff seek opportunities to develop their teaching and improve their students' learning and find, with appropriate support, the teaching portfolio a useful tool. As universities increasingly seek evidence of teaching and, as teaching is recognised as a scholarly activity, so, too, its documentation will be more readily understood and accepted. Such documentation can be successfully provided through the teaching portfolio but it will not be valued by the academic community until its purposes, and hence usefulness, are more fully understood. Awareness needs to be raised at early stages and the ongoing preparation of a portfolio should be built into the culture and expectations of being a professional tertiary educator with appropriate support and recognition that the portfolio can assume many guises. Where, as part of performance review, there is an expectation that teaching claims are evidenced and staff are encouraged and rewarded for demonstrating that they are, indeed, reflective practitioners, the portfolio offers considerable opportunities. In this way recording the past through the preparation of a portfolio makes an important contribution to a more assured future for tertiary educators, their students and their institutions.

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