

## **Postdoc Academic Chat #4**

### **PREPARING A TEACHING PORTFOLIO**

**Wednesday, January 15, 2020**

- 1. Building Your Teaching Portfolio**
- 2. Answers to Common Questions About the Teaching Portfolio**
- 3. Writing a Statement of Teaching Philosophy for the Academic Job Search**

#### **1. Building Your Teaching Portfolio**

The posting below offers a number of practical tips on developing your teaching portfolio. It is from Chapter 7, Looking After Yourself, in The Times HIGHER Education Supplement, 2000 Tips for Lecturers, edited by Phil Race. Kogan Page Limited, 120 Pentonville Road, London, N1 9JN, UK. Distributed by Stylus Publishing Limited, 2283 Quicksilver Drive, Sterling, VA 20166, USA. <http://www.styluspub.com/> Copyright Phil Race, 1999. The right of Phil Race to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. Reprinted with permission.

A teaching portfolio is one of the most successful ways of demonstrating the quality and range of your teaching. Building one could be regarded as the start of something to continue throughout your university career. It can also provide a useful compendium of information to have available for a variety of occasions, including appraisal, formal 'Subject Review' inspections, and applications for promotion or for posts elsewhere. Having a well-filed collection of evidence of the quality of your teaching is a good start towards assembling your actual teaching portfolio. The danger is that putting it all together seems like an enormous task, and tends not to get started! The following suggestions should help you go about building up a representative portfolio of your work:

\* Remind yourself why you want to build a teaching portfolio. It is best that you want to build one, rather than simply that you are required to build one by your institution's staff development programs.

\* Check carefully any specific format suggested for your teaching portfolio. It helps to keep it firmly in mind both while collecting evidence, and annotating it with your own reflective commentaries.

- \* If your portfolio will be assessed, keep the assessment framework in sight. While you can put anything else that you think is relevant into your portfolio if you want to, you need to include evidence that relates to the assessment framework.
- \* Decide what sorts of evidence you will need. The exact nature of your own evidence will depend upon the kinds of work you do with students in your job. Make a list of the main things that you do in your job, and alongside each of these write down a few words about the sort of evidence you could collect to prove that you do it well.
- \* Start collecting evidence straightaway. Much of the content of your teaching portfolio will come from your everyday work with students. The most efficient way of starting off a teaching portfolio is to start collecting examples of this evidence as a normal part of your everyday work.
- \* Collect evidence of your curriculum design work. This can include example of a syllabus area you have planned, intended learning outcomes or objectives you have formulated or adapted, and plans for how you structure your delivery of a syllabus area. You can also include changes you make to existing programmes, with your rationale and justification for such changes.
- \* Collect evidence of your teaching itself. This can include examples of lesson plans, course plans, and examples (not too many!) of the materials that you use in your teaching, such as handout materials, overhead transparencies, and other learning resources that you devise or adapt.
- \* Make sure that you have enough evidence of peer feedback. Make good use of any observation checklists you are provided with. You can also include examples of video-recordings of actual teaching sessions, ranging from large-group lectures, small-group sessions, and one-to-one encounters with students. Remember to be highly selective! A good teaching portfolio includes many kinds of evidence, but only a few examples of each kind.
- \* Collect evidence of student feedback in your teachings. This can include examples of feedback questionnaires completed by students, along with your own analysis of the overall findings from the feedback. Include in your portfolio reflective comments about changes that you have made, or will make, as a result of feedback from students.
- \* Collect evidence of your assessment work. This can include examples of tests and exercises that you set students, and a breakdown of how each test performed in practice. It is useful to link the content of each of the tests and exercises to the intended learning outcomes as expressed in the syllabus areas within which you are working.
- \* Collect evidence of your feedback to students. This can include photocopies of typical assessed work, showing how you give students feedback on their written work. You can also include assignment return sheets that you have devised, copies of e-mails you send

to students, and account of other ways that you ensure that students receive feedback on their progress and performance.

- \* Collect evidence of your collegiality. Such evidence can arise from your participation in course teams, committees and assessment boards. You can also include evidence relating to work you undertake jointly with other staff, showing how well you can work with colleagues.

- \* File your evidence systematically. Don't put it all in a file or a drawer! Sort it first, according to the particular sections of your portfolio into which the evidence will go. It is worth starting up a number of parallel files, to make sure you make it easy to decide where each element of your evidence should be stored.

- \* Decide on the physical form of your portfolio. For example, you may decide to use a ring binder for your main evidence (your reflections, peer-observation details and other important evidence) and lever-arch file for your appendices (examples of handouts, overheads, assessment tasks, feedback to students, and so on). Such formats make it easier to adjust the contents of your portfolio, or to rearrange the order in which you present sections. They also allow you to use punched, plastic wallets to collect together samples of papers such as feedback questionnaires, marked student work, and so on.

- \* Don't use plastic wallets for things that need to be easy to read (or assess!). While it's fine to use such wallets to keep together sets of similar papers in appendices (such as handouts, overheads, questionnaire responses, and so on), it is very frustrating for a reader (or assessor) to have to take out individual primary evidence sheets to read them.

- \* Make a draft index. Decide in which order you wish to present evidence of the quality of your teaching. There is no 'right' order for headings and subheadings, even when the overall structure of the sections of the portfolio is laid down. The order of your headings and subheadings will depend on the nature of your work, and the range of evidence you wish to present for the quality of your work. It is, however, very useful to have this order sorted out in your mind before you start to put together the 'font-end' of your portfolio, in other words, your reflections and commentaries about your evidence.

- \* Think of your target audience. Who is going to read your portfolio? More importantly, who will perhaps make judgements on it? The people who are most likely to look at it in detail are those whose responsibility includes teaching quality, and appraisal.

- \* Don't write the introduction too soon! The introduction to a portfolio is extremely important. There is no second chance to make a good first impression! You can only write really good introduction when you know exactly what you're introducing, so leave the introduction till you've more or less finished everything else in your portfolio. You can, of course, write a draft introduction, but this is probably best as a bullet-point list, or a mind-map sketch.

\* Get other people to give you feedback about your portfolio. Another pair of eyes is always useful. Show bits of your portfolio to your mentor, colleagues, friends, and even contacts in your field in other institutions if you can. Ask them to scribble liberally over anything where it could be worth you having second thoughts, or further explanations. Ask them also not to hesitate in pointing out typographical or grammatical errors: it is always easier for someone else to find them than for us to spot our own!

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## **#2 Answers to Common Questions About the Teaching Portfolio**

The posting below gives answers to common questions about the teaching portfolio. It is from Chapter 5, by the same name in: *The Teaching Portfolio A Practical Guide to Improved Performance and Promotion/Tenure Decisions*, Third Edition, by Peter Seldin, Lubin School of Business, Pace University, Pleasantville, New York. Anker Publishing Company, Inc. Bolton, Massachusetts, Copyright ? 2004 by Anker Publishing Company, Inc. [www.ankerpub.com](http://www.ankerpub.com) All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission. ISBN 1-882982-69-X

In the time I've been working with teaching portfolios, I have visited hundreds of colleges and universities of differing sizes and missions to talk with faculty members and administrators about the portfolio and its place in the evaluation and improvement of teaching. In the course of our discussions, certain questions have come up repeatedly. Those questions and my answers to them follow.

How does the teaching portfolio differ from the usual end-of-the-year faculty report to administrators?

First, the portfolio empowers faculty to include the documents and materials that they feel best reflects their performance in the classroom and is not limited just to items posed by administrators. Second, the portfolio is based on collaboration and mentoring, rather than being prepared by faculty working alone. Third, the purpose of the portfolio determines what is included and how it is arranged. Fourth, in the very preparation of the portfolio professors reflect on why they do what they do in the classroom. For many faculty-almost as a byproduct-this reflection results in improved teaching performance.

Is the portfolio restricted to traditional classroom teaching?

Not at all. The word teaching signifies all professional activity that provides direct support for student learning. That includes not only traditional classroom and laboratory teaching, but also instruction in computer laboratories and small-group settings, one-to-one teacher-student interactions, student advising, and scholarship of teaching and communication of its results.

Don't all portfolios look alike?

Absolutely not. The portfolio is a highly personalized product. Both the content and organization differ widely from one professor to another. Varying importance is assigned by different professors to different items (see the sample portfolios in Part IV of this volume). Different courses and disciplines cater to different types of documentation. Individual differences in portfolio content and organization should be encouraged so long as they are allowed by the department and institution,

How long is the typical portfolio?

It has a narrative of seven to ten pages, followed by a series of appendices that document the claims made in the narrative. Often a three-ring binder holds the portfolio, and tabs identify the different appendices. Just as information in the narrative should be selective, so should the appendices as consist of judiciously chosen evidence.

How much time does it take to prepare?

Most faculty members construct the portfolio in 12 to 15 hours spread over several days. Much of that time is spent in thinking, planning, and gathering the documentation for the appendices.

Who owns the portfolio?

The portfolio is owned by the faculty member who prepares it. Decisions about what goes into it are generally cooperative ones between mentor and professor. But the final decision on what to include, its ultimate use, and the retention of the final product all rest with the professor.

Why are portfolio mentors so important?

Most faculty come to the portfolio process with no prior experience with the concept. That is why the resources of a trained mentor are so important. The mentor—who is comparable to a dissertation advisor—makes suggestions, provides resources, and offers steady support during the portfolio's development.

Should the mentor be from the same discipline as the professor who is preparing the portfolio?

The process of collaboration is not discipline specific. In fact, it is often advantageous for the mentor not to know the details of the teaching content. In that way, the mentor can concentrate on documenting teaching effectiveness instead of how the professor teaches a particular subject. And a wonderful byproduct of working with a colleague from a different discipline is that the mentor learns something about a new field.

Is there a way to self-mentor if there are no trained mentors available?

Although it is strongly recommended that portfolios be developed collaboratively, sometimes there are no willing and able mentors available. In that case, even though the important collaborative aspect of portfolio development will be lost, it is possible to prepare a portfolio. The following self-assessment questions identified by Eison (1996) and Seldin (2003) may help.

- \* Is every claim made in the narrative supported by hard evidence in the appendices?
- \* Is the portfolio sufficiently reflective? Does it include a balance of items from oneself, from others, and from student learning?
- \* Does the portfolio clearly identify what you teach, how you teach it, and why you teach it as you do?
- \* Is a complete table of contents and appendices included?
- \* Does the portfolio contain reflective observations?
- \* Have efforts at growth and improvement been cited?
- \* Are numerical student rating results included for several courses over several years?
- \* Have any department or institutional factors influenced your teaching effectiveness?
- \* Would including some charts, tables, or graphs enhance the portfolio?

Is the syllabus actually inserted into the portfolio?  
Are student ratings? Peer observations?

These normally appear as appendices. But specific references to them are included in the body of the portfolio. For example, "Copies of my syllabi for all courses taught are found in Appendix A." For student ratings and peer observations, a slightly different approach is recommended: Place the actual material in the appendices but include some highlights of that material in the body of the portfolio. Figure 5.1 offers an example.

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Figure 5.1  
Highlights of Student Rating in the Body of the Portfolio

My student ratings are consistently higher than the Department of History average. For the fall 2003 semester, the 22 students in my history course on the Civil War (History 322) rated my teaching as follows:

Questions Dept.	Average	My Score
Explains clearly	4.10	4.35
Stimulated student interest	3.98	4.10
Interesting assignments	3.99	4.22
Motivates students	4.23	4.28
Overall course quality	4.21	4.34
Overall instructor quality	4.33	4.41

Scale: one is low and five is high  
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Doesn't the subjectivity of the portfolio interfere with its use for personal decisions or improvement of teaching?

Surprisingly, it doesn't because of the collaboration between a professor and a mentor who helps steer the portfolio toward meeting the needs of assessment or improvement. Collaboration ensures a fresh, vital, and critical perspective that encourages cohesion between the portfolio's narrative and appendices. The mentor's task is to flesh out objective data, provide balance and control, and corroborate evidence. That's why faculty are urged to enlist the creative and supportive help of a mentor in preparing a portfolio.

Can an impressive looking portfolio gloss over weak teaching?

Absolutely not because the portfolio is an evidence-based document. Supporting material must be included for every claim made. If a faculty member is weak in teaching, the evidence is just not available. For example, an instructor who claims that student evaluations rate class preparation as "outstanding" must provide numerical rating data that bear out this statement. Another example: An instructor who claims that a department chair rated his or her teaching as "exemplary" must provide substantive evidence to support that claim. A fancy cover and attractive printer fonts cannot overcome weak performance in the classroom for a professor any more than they can for a student.

What guidelines would you suggest for getting started with portfolios?

A climate of acceptance must first be built at the college or university. Here are some suggestions that should be helpful in doing so:

- \* Start small.
- \* Rely on faculty volunteers and don't force anyone to participate.
- \* Involve the institution's most respected faculty members from the outset.
- \* Obtain top-level administrative support for the portfolio approach and an institutional commitment for the necessary resources.
- \* Keep everyone informed about what is going on every step of the way.
- \* Allow room for individual differences in portfolios. Styles of teaching differ. So do disciplines.
- \* Permit sufficient time-a year, or even two-for acceptance and implementation.

Are the time and energy required to prepare a portfolio really worth the benefits?

In my view, and in the view of virtually every one of the 500 faculty members I've personally mentored as they prepared their portfolios, the answer is a resounding yes. It usually takes no more than a few days to prepare, and the benefits are considerable. The teaching portfolio allows professors to describe their teaching strengths and accomplishments for the record, a clear advantage when evaluation committees examine the record in making promotion and tenure decisions. But the portfolio does more than

that. Many faculty members find that the very process of collecting and sorting documents and materials that reflect their teaching performance serves as a springboard for self-improvement. And, importantly, many colleges and universities find that portfolios help to underscore teaching as an institutional priority.

It is estimated that as many as 2,000 colleges and universities in the United States are now using or experimenting with portfolios. Considering the above benefits, it's not surprising that the teaching portfolio has proven to be one of the most popular and successful approaches in years.

The key to developing successful teaching portfolio programs is to proceed slowly, carefully, openly, and to lay the groundwork for each step. Success does not come automatically, but it comes. The proof is in the many successful programs operating around the country.

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### **#3 Writing a Statement of Teaching Philosophy for the Academic Job Search**

The posting below is an excerpt on some key points to pay attention to in writing a teaching philosophy statement. It is by Chris O'Neal, Deborah Meizlish, and Matthew Kaplan\* and is from the Occasional Paper series (#23) published by the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT) [<http://www.crlt.umich.edu/>] at the University of Michigan. THE FULL ARTICLE CAN BE FOUND AT: [http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/CRLT\\_no23.pdf](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/CRLT_no23.pdf) Copyright 2007 The University of Michigan. Reprinted with permission.

Domestic Environmental Policy and Politics.

Lehigh University's yearold Environmental Initiative seeks an Assistant Professor for a tenure track position? To apply, please send a cover letter, current curriculum vitae, syllabi and other evidence of teaching style and effectiveness, a statement of teaching philosophy, a sample of scholarship (if available) and three letters of reference.

Assistant Professor (tenure track) Specialization in African and Post Colonial Literatures?. Send letter of application, curriculum vitae, statement of teaching philosophy, graduate school transcript, and three letters of recommendation? Northeastern Illinois University is an affirmative action, equal opportunity employer.

LSU's Department of Chemistry ([chemistry.lsu.edu](http://chemistry.lsu.edu)) anticipates filling one or two tenure-track positions in the fields of NMR Spectroscopy (Ref: Log #0184) and Physical Chemistry (Ref: Log #0186), broadly defined?. Applications should consist of a research proposal, a statement of teaching philosophy, and a curriculum vitae (including address). Applicants should arrange for submission of three letters of recommendation.

Introduction

As these recent job ads illustrate, requests for teaching philosophies are common in the academic market. In fact, a survey of 457 search committee chairs in six disciplines (English, history, political science, psychology, biology, and chemistry) found that 57% requested a teaching statement at some point in a job search (Meizlish & Kaplan, in press). These results differed slightly by institutional type, with master's and bachelor's institutions requesting them more often than doctoral institutions. Results also differed by discipline. Surprisingly, requests for teaching philosophies were most frequent in the natural sciences. But the overall message is clear: job applicants in all fields may be asked to submit a teaching philosophy (see also Bruff, in press; Montell, 2003; Schönwetter, Taylor, & Ellis, 2006).

Teaching philosophies can serve several purposes (e.g., self-reflection, introduction to a teaching portfolio, communication with students), but we focus here on those written for academic job applications. Such statements communicate a job candidate's approach to teaching and learning to a faculty considering whether to make that candidate one of their colleagues. Since a committee cannot possibly observe the teaching of every applicant, the teaching philosophy helps search committee members imagine themselves in each candidate's classroom. What is it like to be one of this instructor's students? Why does she make the pedagogical decisions she does? As a student in this classroom, how would I spend my fifty minutes on a given day? How does the instructor address the challenges and resources of teaching in his particular discipline? Does her teaching style complement our department's philosophy of instruction?

This Occasional Paper is designed to help experienced graduate students write a statement of teaching philosophy. The paper contains four sections. First, we offer suggestions for making a philosophy of teaching explicit and getting it on paper. Second, we discuss research on characteristics of effective statements. Third, we introduce a rubric that can guide the development and crafting of a teaching statement that search committees will value. Finally, we address questions that job candidates often raise about this sometimes perplexing document.

### Advice for Getting Started

Just because you have never written a statement of your teaching philosophy does not mean you do not have a philosophy. If you engage a group of learners who are your responsibility, then your behavior in designing their learning environment must follow from your philosophical orientation?. What you need to do is discover what [your philosophy] is and then make it explicit. (Coppola, 2000, p. 1)

Beginning the teaching philosophy is often the hardest part of writing one. The motivations behind the decisions we make in the classroom can be surprisingly elusive when we try to put them on paper. Since there is no single approach that will work for all writers, we offer three strategies for getting started:

1. Goodyear and Allchin (1998) found that thinking about the "big" questions of teaching helped instructors articulate their philosophies:

- \* What motivates me to learn about this subject?
- \* What do I expect to be the outcomes of my teaching?
- \* How do I know when I've taught successfully?

2. In workshops and seminars at U-M, we have found that some graduate students prefer to approach a statement by thinking about more concrete and manageable "fragments" of teaching that can then be assembled into a holistic essay. The following questions are designed to get you started:

- \* Why do you teach?
- \* What do you believe or value about teaching and student learning?
- \* If you had to choose a metaphor for teaching/learning, what would it be?
- \* How do your research and disciplinary context influence your teaching?
- \* How do your identity/background and your students' identities/backgrounds affect teaching and learning in your classes?
- \* How do you take into account differences in student learning styles in your teaching?
- \* What is your approach to evaluating and assessing students?

3. Finally, some instructors find it most useful to begin by simply looking at examples of others' philosophies. CRLT has posted sample statements from a variety of disciplines at <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/tstrategies/tstpum.html>. When looking at others' philosophies, you will likely note considerable variation, both in terms of content and format, and you will likely find some approaches that resonate with you. While there is no single approach to a teaching philosophy, Figure 1 provides some general guidelines for those statements written for the academic job market.

Figure 1. Some general guidelines for writing the teaching philosophy (adapted from Chism, 1998):

- \* Keep it brief (1-2 pages).
- \* Use a narrative, first person approach.
- \* Make it reflective and personal.
- \* Discuss your goals for your students, the methods you use to achieve those goals, and the assessments you use to find out if students have met your expectations.
- \* Explain your specific disciplinary context and use specific examples of your practice.
- \* Showcase your strengths and accomplishments.

Once you've articulated a first draft, you can begin shaping and polishing it for the search committees who will be reading it. In the following section, we discuss characteristics of successful teaching philosophy statements and provide a rubric for evaluating a teaching statement and aiming it at the right audience.

What Constitutes a Good Statement?

In their survey of search committee chairs, Meizlish and Kaplan (in press) found broad agreement on the desirable characteristics of a statement of teaching philosophy. Specifically, chairs described successful teaching statements as having the following characteristics:

- \* They offer evidence of practice. Search committee chairs want to understand how candidates enact their teaching philosophies. In particular, they want to see specific and personal examples and experiences rather than vague references to educational jargon or formulaic statements.

- \* They convey reflectiveness. Search committees want to know that a candidate is a thoughtful instructor. They are interested in candidates who can discuss their approach to instructional challenges and their plans for future pedagogical development.

- \* They communicate that teaching is valued. Search chairs appreciate a tone or language that conveys a candidate's enthusiasm and commitment to teaching. They are wary of candidates who talk about teaching as a burden or a requirement that is less important than research.

- \* They are student- or learning-centered, attuned to differences in student abilities, learning styles, or levels. Search committee chairs want concrete evidence of a candidate's attentiveness to student learning (rather than just content) and awareness of and ability to deal with student differences in the classroom.

- \* They are well written, clear, and readable. Search chairs draw conclusions about candidates from all elements of the application packet. Candidates can be undermined by carelessness in their teaching statements.

Note again that the full article can be found at:

[http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/CRLT\\_no23.pdf](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/CRLT_no23.pdf)

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