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The Course Portfolio as a Tool for Continuous Improvement of Teaching and Learning

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This article explains how to use learning-centered course portfolios to improve teaching and learning. After developing a rationale for using teaching portfolios that focus on individual courses, the author discusses how course portfolios can be used to (a) document and assess more fully the substance and complexity of teaching, (b) connect assessment of teaching with assessment of learning, and (c) foster better teaching and learning. The article concludes with a discussion of portfolio use on the author's campus and in his own teaching.

Assessment in Higher Education

According to guidelines proposed by the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE Assessment Forum, 1992),

Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes. Information about outcomes is of high importance; where students “end up” matters greatly. But to improve outcomes, we need to know about student experience along the way—about the curricula, teaching, and the kind of student effort that lead to particular outcomes. Assessment can help us understand which students learn best under what conditions; with such knowledge comes the capacity to improve the whole of learning. (p. 2)

One of the most critical connections in students' education—the link between teaching and learning—is often overlooked in assessment practices. Assessment focuses on either learning or teaching but not on the interplay between the two. Assessments of learning typically document students' knowledge but do not examine how classroom practices contribute to learning outcomes. Traditional methods for evaluating teaching

examine instructional practices but often ignore how those practices influence students' learning, thinking, and development.

Even portfolio assessment approaches, which document teaching and learning more fully, do not necessarily examine the interplay between the two. Teaching portfolios may contain evidence of students' learning, but such information is optional, and when included, it may be only one of many pieces of material (Edgerton, Hutchings, & Quinlan, 1991; Seldin, 1991). Student portfolios, which document learning in more detail, seldom reveal how teaching contributes to students' progress (Forrest, 1990).

Traditional methods of assessment certainly contribute to the improvement of education. However, practices that separate teaching from learning increase the chances that faculty members will perceive both types of assessment as irrelevant to their day-to-day classroom work. This seriously limits the role that individual teachers can and will play in assessing for educational improvement. Teachers are in the best position to affect students' learning, but most assessment practices do not provide information that would help them better understand and improve the way their teaching affects students' learning, thinking, and development.

Several obstacles inhibit the widespread acceptance and use of what I would call "learning-centered assessment" (i.e., assessment concerned with the interplay between teaching and learning) among college faculty. One is the long-standing tension between formative and summative evaluation. The dominant mode of evaluation of students and teachers is summative; the aim is to evaluate the endpoint of learning or teaching performance. In the classroom, teachers evaluate students to determine what they know and to assign grades, but not to examine how teaching contributes to students' knowledge and skills. Evaluation of teaching also tends to be summative, intended to judge the overall quality of teaching performance for personnel decisions (e.g., promotion, tenure, merit). Because summative evaluation is tied to the reward structure, faculty take it much more seriously than formative evaluation. One of the most unfortunate consequences of this summative emphasis is that it inhibits open and productive discussions about teaching; in essence, it marginalizes the types of activity that could lead to better teaching (Cerbin, 1992b).

Another constraint working against learning-centered assessment is more practical, having to do with how assessment of teaching and learning fits into faculty work. Summative evaluation of teaching gets done because it is part of the formal system of expectations and rewards. Summative evaluation of student learning gets done within individual classes as part of grading practices. Assessment for improvement is less likely to get done because it is not well integrated into daily teaching.

Even when faculty value formative assessment, it is still perceived as additional work and assumes a lower priority among the other demands of teaching, research, and service.

This analysis of the assessment culture in higher education suggests that assessment for educational improvement depends upon several key conditions. One is that teachers must play a more central role in assessment, because they are important agents of change in the teaching-learning relationship. A second condition is that assessment must be learning-centered, focused on the links between teaching and learning. The information from assessment should provide the instructor with a basis for improving teaching and student learning. A third condition is that assessment must be better integrated with teachers' work. Faculty will invest serious effort in assessment only to the extent that it is connected to goals, issues, and problems that really matter to them. Ideally, assessment techniques should serve multiple purposes (i.e., both formative and summative) so that faculty can consolidate and streamline the assessment of student learning with assessment of teaching. Finally, another important condition is that assessment should be a collaborative endeavor, one in which mutual support and peer review sustain continual improvement of teaching and learning. Indeed, instructors and their classrooms must be at the center of assessment, but colleagues should be moving toward collective efforts to assess teaching, learning, and program quality.

What We Assess Is What We Get

Assessment plays an integral role in shaping values and behavior. As psychologist Lauren Resnick puts it, "What we assess is what we value. We get what we assess, and if we don't assess it, we don't get it" (cited in Wiggins, 1990). Resnick's comments refer to assessment of learning, and college teachers certainly recognize the connection between what they assess and what their students learn. I think the same principles apply to the assessment of teaching. What we assess in teaching reflects and influences what we value about teaching, and ultimately affects the way we teach.

Unfortunately, traditional methods of evaluating teaching are based upon underdeveloped and fragmented conceptions of teaching. More often than not, teaching is construed as a batch of isolable skills and personal qualities such as clarity of explanation, enthusiasm for subject matter, fairness in grading, and so on. These are dimensions that typically appear on student rating instruments. Of course, these qualities have something to do with teaching; the problem is that we treat them as if they constitute the *whole* of teaching. Consider, for example, that

teachers might be evaluated on the same 10 to 15 dimensions year after year throughout their careers.

My concern is with-back to Resnick's dictum-what we don't get because we don't assess it. We do not get ongoing conversations about the complexities of teaching and learning. Instead, we have a tacit agreement that teaching, although hard work, is not especially challenging or complicated. In fact, once the basic skills have been honed, teaching becomes rather routine.

If we really care about long-term development and improvement, then we need to start with more generative assumptions about teaching and learning. One essential idea is that teaching and learning are connected and that the primary aim of teaching is to enhance students' understanding, thinking, and development. Because teaching and learning are intricately related, they ought to be examined together rather than each in isolation. This leads us to a learning-centered emphasis in assessment, where the object is to examine continually how teaching affects learning and to use that information to enhance students' educational experiences.

In addition, we need to emphasize the problematic nature of teaching. Helping students to understand, think, and develop is not straightforward or routine. On a daily basis, teachers confront complex situations related to students' learning, such as how to help students understand particularly difficult material, or how to improve their ability to reason and think critically, or how to engender commitment to learning goals among disinterested students, or how to help students overcome their fear of a subject, and so on. Good teaching involves invention, problem solving, knowledge worrying, and ongoing revision.

The Learning-Centered Course Portfolio as an Assessment Tool

Clearly, we need tools that help us understand and represent the substance and complexity of teaching and learning. The teaching portfolio is a promising approach, but to be most useful, the portfolio should reveal and analyze teaching-learning relationships”

The site or context for examining teaching-learning processes is critical. Questions about how teaching affects student learning are necessarily connected to specific situations-who is trying to learn what under what conditions and for what purposes. I suggest that the individual course is an ideal context in which to examine the interplay between teaching and learning. A course is a coherent entity, with specific goals, content, methods, and outcomes. Moreover, from a teacher's perspective, the development, teaching, and revision of a course is comparable

to a major piece of scholarship. The portfolio captures the scholarship in teaching the course and provides a specific focus for examining and discussing teaching in a coherent way (Cerbin, 1992c, 1993).

Course Portfolio Design

A course portfolio is a personalized document that represents the specific aims and work of its author and is structured to explain what, how, and why students learn or do not learn in a class. The core of the portfolio consists of four major parts:

1. *A teaching statement.* The teaching statement conveys the instructor's assumptions and beliefs about teaching and learning and explains the intended learning outcomes of the course, the teaching practices used to address the learning outcomes, and a rationale that connects the course goals to the teacher's methods. The teaching statement is the foundation of the portfolio. By clarifying the relationship between methods and intended outcomes, the instructor creates a framework for analyzing and evaluating teaching and learning in the class.

2. *An analysis of student learning.* The analysis is based upon student performance on two or more key assignments or learning activities that represent the typical kinds of teaching and learning that take place in the class and also address one or more important course goals. The analysis summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of students' learning and indicates how the assignment and classroom practices could be revised to enhance future performance.

3. *An analysis of student feedback.* The analysis is based upon feedback from students about how teaching affects their learning in the class. The instructor summarizes student feedback and indicates how to change the course or teaching in response to student concerns.

4. *A course summary.* The summary describes the strengths and weaknesses of the course in terms of students' learning, offers possible reasons for students' learning or lack of learning, and identifies changes that may enhance student performance.

Essentially, a course portfolio is like a manuscript of scholarly work in progress, in this case, a work that explains what, how, and why students learn or do not learn in a course (Cerbin, 1992c). Portfolio development structures self-assessment and careful reflection about one's purposes, goals, and their connections to teaching practices. It also involves analysis of students' progress toward course goals and consideration of how students experience the course. And, as the course concludes, the instructor reflects upon the ways that goals have been realized, changed, or unmet. The final analysis leads to ideas about what to change in order to enhance students' learning, thinking, and development the next time the class is taught.

*How to Use Course Portfolios to Enhance Teaching
and Students' Learning, Thinking, and Development*

By concentrating specifically on the relationship between teaching and learning in a single course, portfolios provide an ideal means for stimulating teaching improvement. Portfolio construction can promote focused self-review in several ways:

1. Writing the teaching statement requires careful examination of one's assumptions and beliefs about how teaching affects students' learning, and forces teachers to articulate their reasons for teaching as they do.
2. Examining student performance invites faculty to compare what they intend students to learn against actual performance and helps pinpoint specific strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning.
3. Analyzing student feedback helps the instructor to reflect on teaching and learning from the students' perspective and to identify successful as well as less successful features of the course.
4. Writing a summary gives the teacher an opportunity to describe the extent to which students attain the course objectives and to reflect on what worked well and what could be done to improve teaching and learning in the course.

How to Use Course Portfolios to Evaluate Teaching

The course portfolio provides a focus for substantive discussions within academic departments and committees about the nature of good teaching and about expectations, standards, and evaluative criteria related to teaching performance. Traditional instruments and assessment practices provide little substance for these discussions. Colleagues should be able to read a portfolio and understand the goals, methods, rationale, and learning outcomes of the course. I can imagine faculty using portfolios to ask substantive questions such as:

1. What should count as appropriate goals in a course?
2. Are the teaching practices in a course reasonable ways to accomplish the learning goals?
3. What do students learn to do in the course, and how does teaching contribute to students' progress?
4. How does the instructor respond to students' learning difficulties? Inevitably, students will not learn as intended, or some will lag significantly. In what ways does the teacher revise teaching and the course to address these problems?
5. What effects does teaching have on students' attitudes and beliefs about learning? Are they more or less confident, interested, fearful, etc.?

These are precisely the kinds of questions that faculty must address if they intend to develop more effective ways to improve their teaching and students' learning.

Another important feature of course portfolios is the way that students participate as informed and significant partners in assessing and improving teaching and learning. The instructor's teaching statement informs students about the goals and methods of the course. Students become mindful of how teaching is supposed to be connected to course goals, and they are invited regularly to comment on how they experience the course. They learn to monitor and evaluate their progress toward learning goals in relation to teaching in the class. This contrasts sharply with students' marginal involvement in standard course evaluations.

*How to Use Course Portfolios
to Document Learning Outcomes*

Course portfolios can be used to document learning outcomes for programs such as the academic major or general education. For instance, a department might aggregate and summarize information about students' learning from the portfolios of faculty who teach different sections of the same course. Undoubtedly, this information will be 'messier' than that provided by a standardized test. However, it also should be much more useful to have teachers analyze students' learning and then trace students' progress or lack of progress back to classroom teaching. Over time, faculty who teach the same course might develop a common way to summarize students' learning. The advantage is that the information grows out of the teachers' classroom experiences and suggests ways to change or improve their teaching.

Course portfolios also might be used to document important teaching/learning processes. It should be relatively easy to "score" the portfolios for different sections of the same course to determine the extent to which students receive constructive feedback, engage in assignments that involve complex thinking, discuss ideas with peers, and so on.

Fitting the Portfolio Into and Not Onto Teaching

Assessment is likely to be ignored or rejected by faculty if it is perceived as work that is tangential to their daily classroom concerns. The problem is how to integrate the portfolio with teaching and not simply add it on as another task. My view is that the portfolio should develop out of and in conjunction with the work that faculty already do in planning, preparing, teaching, and revising a course. The course portfolio is merely a more systematic way to examine, revise, and represent teaching and learning in a course. And, if the actual product

of analysis-the portfolio-can then be used for other purposes, such as program assessment or as part of promotion or tenure materials, it is more likely to be adopted by faculty.

Contexts for Portfolio Development and Use

The Collaborative Context

Teaching portfolios provide an ideal way to foster more reflective and focused discussions about teaching. According to Hutchings (cited in Anderson, 1993),

An intent to use portfolios to make teaching more public is in every way admirable, and a good number of campuses find it a key to implementation, as well. They begin by recruiting a group of respected faculty to develop portfolio entries that can be shared with colleagues. In such scenarios, a highly engaging discussion ensues, and the discussion is not about portfolios per se but about the teaching represented in the entry ... This point is worth noting in terms of not only "change strategies" but purposes: What we're after ultimately is not, after all, a better tool for documenting teaching but better teaching! (p. 4)

The Departmental and Disciplinary Contexts

Academic departments create local cultures that exert strong influence over their members. They define expectations, set standards, sanction behavior, and encourage values and attitudes toward teaching and learning. If the course portfolio is to become a widespread means of assessment, it must become part of departmental cultures, accepted and sanctioned at the departmental level.

Portfolio development and use must be situated in departments for disciplinary reasons as well. Epistemologies differ across disciplines, and so do fundamental ideas about teaching. It is important for colleagues within the same discipline to grapple with issues of what constitutes effective teaching in their field. Course portfolios may take on distinctly different features depending upon the academic discipline.

So, Do Course Portfolios Actually Work?

Observations From One Campus

Faculty at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse are just beginning to explore the teaching portfolio as an assessment device. There is no mandate to use portfolios, although there is an emphasis in the

Wisconsin system on strengthening teaching evaluation practices and establishing post-tenure review procedures. In the past year, a substantial number of UW-La Crosse faculty have attended workshops on teaching portfolios. And, as director of our teaching center, I led two semester-long seminars to assist faculty in portfolio development. The idea of the teaching portfolio has spread across campus.

Individual faculty members who have chosen to develop portfolios have done so for a variety of reasons: to enhance tenure and promotion possibilities, teaching improvement, and even their curriculum vitae for job searches. Several academic departments are trying to adopt portfolios for both formative and summative evaluation of teaching; another intends to use portfolios as part of formative assessment only. One department has explored the idea of using course portfolios to help analyze and improve an introductory, two-course sequence in their major.

The semester-long seminars offer the best evidence of how portfolios actually work. These sessions have been especially productive, but not so much in terms of actual portfolio development as in the kinds of discussion and changes they have fostered. The portfolio material that individuals brought to the seminars focused discussion on very specific issues, problems, and situations of direct concern to the faculty members. The sessions evolved into conversations about teaching and learning rather than how to build a portfolio. We used portfolio pieces like cases to highlight and analyze teaching-learning issues. The discussions constituted a kind of collaboration focused not on passing judgment about the worthiness of anyone's teaching, but on helping one another understand and think through each specific case. Of course, this is limited, anecdotal evidence, but it suggests that course portfolios provide an ideal prompt for constructive self- and peer review of teaching and learning. The individuals in these sessions did not just create portfolio entries; they actually modified their teaching practices.

Confessions of a Course Portfolio Author

Last year I created a course portfolio (Cerbin, 1992a), which I began by writing a teaching statement. What I anticipated to be a fairly straightforward task evolved into an extended confrontation with the inconsistencies between my beliefs and my practices. For instance, I claimed that the development of critical thinking was a top priority in my class, but the way I evaluated students' learning relied heavily on memorization. And, I found that despite a lot of rhetoric about the importance of collaborative learning, I still focused primarily on the individual work of students. Further, I discovered that I had claimed a number of goals in my class that I did not address at all. The exercise of

writing the statement helped me clarify my basic assumptions and beliefs about teaching, and then to reconcile these beliefs with my actual teaching practices.

My portfolio contains several analyses of student performance on class assignments. In each case, I tried to explain the discrepancies between my goals and what students were able to do. And, in each case, this led me to propose changes in my teaching that might help enhance students' learning on future assignments. I was able to make some of these changes during the course.

Recently, a colleague critiqued my portfolio material and provided the most clearly focused, insightful, and useful feedback I have ever received about my teaching. This exchange of ideas (i.e., my course "manuscript" and his critique) is exactly the kind of conversation I want to have about teaching. I have used excerpts from the portfolio in workshops and seminars. Without exception, faculty respond with thoughtful analyses and constructive suggestions about what I might do differently next time, or where I have overlooked something important about students' learning. These instances illustrate the way that the course portfolio can lead to scholarly exchanges about teaching and learning that are aimed at improvement.

Building a course portfolio has prompted and facilitated the most extensive changes I have made in any course in years, changes that are meant to improve students' progress toward specific course goals. One of the most important lessons I have learned is that it is crucial to represent one's best thinking about teaching and learning, even if that means revealing the problems, disappointments, and disasters that take place in a class. All of the difficulties and problems are points of departure for making improvements and progress. The portfolio serves as a guide or map. I can see more clearly where I have been, where I want to be, and have better ideas about how to get there.

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