

# Teaching Portfolios: Uses Beyond Accountability

By Susan Talburt

The widespread use of faculty teaching portfolios—they are now used to varying degrees at some 500 postsecondary institutions in the United States—has come about largely in response to a dual concern in our nation's colleges and universities.

The concern: Increasing public skepticism about higher education's mission and how well this mission is being carried out has put pressure on our institutions both to improve teaching and learning and to become more accountable for the teaching and learning already going on.

Teaching portfolios seem to respond to these needs on both counts, as they are said to be ideal both for encouraging reflection and collaboration among faculty and enabling administrators to document quality teaching.<sup>1</sup>

But it is likely that, in their zeal to appease critics and improve the quality of teaching on campus, higher education leaders—both

administration and faculty—have put the wrong emphasis on the use of portfolios and may wind up defeating their own purposes.

In this article, I propose that if we were to use portfolios as part of an ongoing discussion of the value of teaching rather than as a means of documentation for accountability or fostering technical teaching improvement, portfolios might in fact serve a higher purpose than the monitoring role they play now: They might actually help encourage faculty and institutional renewal.

Teaching portfolios have been described by writers such as Kenneth Wolf as “a container for storing and displaying evidence of a teacher's knowledge and skills.”

Their use stems from a belief that “assessment is dynamic and that the richest portrayals of teacher—and student—performance are based on multiple sources of evidence collected over time in authentic settings,”<sup>2</sup> in a portfolio.

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Faculty portfolios vary, but they generally contain:

- materials from the faculty member—a statement of teaching philosophy, description and evaluation of instructional approaches, course syllabi, assignments, teaching goals.
- evidence of student learning—test scores, samples of graded work, professional or academic work after the class.
- and material from others—student evaluations, statements from peers and administrators who have observed classes, evidence of professional development, honors, and awards.<sup>3</sup>

Portfolios, many believe, should balance commentary about teaching and “artifacts” of teaching—concrete examples of classroom instruction.<sup>4</sup> Faculty then use these portfolios to reflect on and modify their teaching. In this way, portfolios become documents of ongoing reflection and improvement that “lead to improved classroom performance.”<sup>5</sup>

According to many writers, portfolios should be developed in faculty working groups, or with mentors, to help them “become a departure point for *substantive conversations* about the quality of a teacher’s work.”<sup>6</sup>

John Zubizarreta, for example, argues that “the portfolio’s process

of written reflection invokes the power of narration—the ability of writing to make the often unrecognized dimensions of teaching visible and understood by a community of readers.”<sup>7</sup>

But this emphasis on portfolio use for faculty development within a campus culture in which teaching is “valued” is less innocent than it might appear.

With pressures for institutional accountability and the increasing use of portfolios for personnel decisions, institutions, with the support of some higher education researchers, have begun to dictate requirements for format and content of portfolios.

In one example of the thinking of some higher education scholars, Ross and her colleagues argue:

Even where portfolios are developed for the purpose of self-evaluation, some standardization may help because the nature of mandated content communicates institutional expectations. In fact, discussion of what should be included in portfolios, and why, is an essential part of establishing a “culture of evidence” about teaching analogous to the “culture of evidence” now used to evaluate the quality of scholarship in colleges and universities.<sup>8</sup>

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Understood this way, portfolios become less a dialogue about the value of teaching than a developmental activity in which faculty learn—and perhaps seek to conform to—institutional norms.

The reality is that the “culture of evidence” that determines criteria for portfolios is often based on predetermined definitions of teaching expertise. For instance, Lee Shulman has proposed the categories of subject matter content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and curricular knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

Peter Seldin, in another example, links teaching improvement to institutional demands. He argues that a portfolio “displays and documents teaching in specific ways consistent with particular disciplinary pedagogies and institutional missions while offering the professor a genuine base for teaching enhancement.”<sup>10</sup>

Notes Seldin: “Findings indicate that effective teachers are masters of their subject, can organize and emphasize, can clarify ideas and point out relationships, can motivate students, and are reasonable, open, concerned and imaginative human beings.”<sup>11</sup>

In a widely read monograph, Edgerton, Quinlan, and Hutchings explain: “The more we understand about what is important in teaching, the more we understand about

how acts of teaching can best be captured and revealed for others to review.”<sup>12</sup>

Implicit in such logic is an assumption that once “effective teaching” is defined, examples of it can be narrated and documented for others.

**T**he message in all this is clear: Institutional standards are not what’s open to discussion and change. Despite claims that the public nature of portfolios can extend dialogue about teaching to evaluative situations in the form of discussions with administrators, there is little, if any, research evidence that these conversations happen.

The real value of the portfolio, it seems, is in providing “a record of real teaching activities that can be compared to the ideal teaching roles as defined by the institution.”<sup>13</sup>

Faculty create their portfolios in such a way as to align themselves and their teaching with institutional purposes and ideals. Portfolios, then, can allow administrators to document faculty work for the purposes of institutional justification and the distribution of resources and rewards.

When used in this way—to assess teaching performance in relation to institutional norms—can portfolios also serve to engender reflection and dialogue that

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enhance pedagogy?

Centra, among others, points to tensions between formative (reflective) and summative (evaluative) portfolios, suggesting that formative evaluations may facilitate reflection on pedagogical actions, but that summative evaluation may be contradictory to such purposes and “may alter the contents of the portfolio.”<sup>14</sup>

Portfolios do represent a significant improvement over standardized teaching evaluations by bringing together faculty pedagogical understandings, classroom events, and student learning, but there is little reason to think they represent the complexities of “real” teaching and reflective improvement. Any optimism in this regard must be mediated by an understanding that portfolios, like all documents, are produced for specific readers and contexts.

Despite the seeming liberatory nature of portfolios in allowing faculty to define the terms of assessment by selecting evidence of their choosing, their choices are circumscribed by institutional mandates and codes of effective teaching.

As a result, portfolios may not offer a view “beneath the surface of the performance itself to examine the decisions that shaped a teacher’s actions” or “a snapshot of teaching performance.”<sup>15</sup>

Portfolios, more likely, repre-

sent faculty members’ efforts to demonstrate alignment with institutional definitions of effective teaching and learning.

A look at the process of faculty evaluation and development through a lens provided by Michel Foucault underscores the dangers inherent when faculty believe that portfolios increase faculty control over evaluation and faculty development.

Portfolios seem a particularly apt object of a Foucauldian analysis, for, as a form of examination, they “engage individuals in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them.”<sup>16</sup>

Central to Foucault’s analysis is the means by which subjects are monitored and the ways their consciousness of being monitored leads them to internalize behavioral norms.<sup>17</sup> His emphasis on the effects of surveillance on one’s consciousness and actions—or what one represents of one’s actions—highlights the problematic nature of portfolios as a representation of teaching.

In fact, portfolios could be considered forms of confession, what Foucault calls “one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth.”<sup>18</sup>

The confession, he says,

is a ritual of discourse in

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which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile.<sup>19</sup>

As a disciplinary tactic, portfolios may provide an increasingly sophisticated technique of monitoring faculty development toward codified norms of effective teaching.

As a mode of confession, portfolios do not simply allow a truth of teaching to surface but are constructed in the context of administrative power that defines the terms by which teaching can be evaluated.

**C**ontextual problems, such as the blurring of formative and summative assessment, the potential for normative uses of portfolios, and limited definitions of pedagogy used in defining portfolio contents do not mean that portfolios cannot enhance teaching or create more meaningful assessment and dialogue around teaching.

But the contradictions between reflective inquiry and preformulat-

ed assessment criteria suggest a need for careful uses of portfolios.

Those who seek to create criteria for and evaluate portfolios must ask:

- Can teaching and learning really be seen, particularly when faculty construct portfolios that seek to demonstrate conformity to institutional definitions?
- Should pedagogy conform to evaluation that seeks to know if students have learned what we think we teach? Or does pedagogy find its effects in the unpredictability of what is learned, in the ways pedagogical experiences change selves?
- What if pedagogy is understood as an ethical relation? A moral practice? As a process of keeping questions open rather than answering them? Can such pedagogical understandings or enactments be represented or codified as “effective teaching”? Can “effective teaching” in fact be codified?
- These questions raise another set of questions:
- Are portfolios meant to align teaching with institutional mission or to promote a culture in which institutional purposes are constantly renegotiated, redefined, and enacted in new ways?
- Should portfolios encourage teachers to recognize and adapt

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to institutional norms? Or can portfolios help faculty understand how the dilemmas of their teaching are produced within social and institutional contexts and to change not only their pedagogical methods but institutional practices, as well?

- What if portfolios were disentangled from individual evaluation and institutional accountability?

I suggest that understanding portfolio development as a form of action research might open it to purposes beyond institutional accountability and faculty alignment.

This concept of teaching portfolios as a genre of action research has been relatively unexplored. Loosely defined, action research is

a systematic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical, and undertaken by the participants of inquiry. The goals of such research are the understanding of practice and the articulation of a rationale or philosophy of practice in order to improve practice.<sup>20</sup>

As presently practiced and conceptualized, portfolio development falls primarily into the domain of technical improvement, focused more on the "how" than the "why" of teaching.

Those who subscribe to this model advocate such activities as classroom research in which instructors gather ongoing student feedback in order to adjust their teaching accordingly.<sup>21</sup>

Inquiry that responds to student concerns certainly has merit. But, portfolios used to foster technical improvement are only relevant to individual instructors in instrumental ways. It would be better to use portfolios in projects undertaken by communities of faculty to address the relationship of wider, social and institutional contexts to classroom practice.

Portfolio development as inquiry that moves beyond reflective-technical models to include a critical social dimension would shift the location of instructional improvement from individual classroom practices to include the workings of universities themselves.

Such inquiry could include examination of the relations of institutional, faculty, and student needs and demands, the dynamics of race, class, gender, and sexuality in structuring classroom interactions, and the relations of curricular offerings to classroom practices.

Faculty portfolio groups that do not, as Brookfield says, "understand institutional structures or curriculum as given, but as constructed and tentative, as framed

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by human agency and therefore capable of being dismantled and reframed by teachers and students,"<sup>22</sup> may posit possibilities for classroom and institutional change beyond the technical.

The power of collaborative portfolio development may very well lie in non-teleological questioning that connects classrooms to contexts yet never fully answers its own questions. At the heart of pedagogy, reflection, effectiveness, evaluation, and accountability are questions of *value*, which, as Bill Readings has said, are "systematically incapable of closure."<sup>23</sup> Refusing the individualization of teaching, Readings argues that

pedagogy cannot be understood apart from a reflection on the institutional context of education. This reflection refuses both the isolation of education in relation to wider social practices and the subjugation of education to predetermined or externally derived social imperatives. Institutional forms are always at work in teaching: forms of address, rooms, conditions of possibility. Paying attention to the pragmatics of the pedagogic scene, without losing sight of institutional forms, is important, because it refuses to make the pedagogical relation into an object of administrative knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

In a culture of accountability that defines itself by criteria such as excellence and efficiency, portfolio development might "keep the question of evaluation open" and remind university communities that "to whom and what the University remains accountable are questions we must continue to pose and worry over."<sup>25</sup>

Portfolio development, rather than becoming a part of the apparatus of accountability, may better contribute to creating campus cultures in which institutional structures and mission are discussed and renegotiated, and questions of the value and purposes of teaching and learning and the elements that constitute "effective teaching" remain open.

**T**he openness I advocate is in many ways contrary to the demands that faculty be "tangibly" productive in their research and teaching.

How can reflection that is not tied to explicit ends be encouraged within present university structures? Faculty will need to appropriate mechanisms for the measurement and development of teaching for new purposes.

For example, those faculty already engaged in portfolio development may have to make such projects serve dual purposes. At the same time, they may use their

institutions' new emphases on the enhancement of teaching to raise questions of value in their departments and universities.

Other faculty—particularly those at research institutions where pedagogical reflection is an unlikely evaluative category for promotion and tenure—may use their committee work to raise questions about the forces that structure pedagogy in their specific disciplines.

Present structures, such as curriculum and teaching committees and peer evaluation of teaching, can be used for shared inquiry into pedagogy.

In addition, faculty members could put to new uses publications on pedagogy that presently form part of an institutional criteria of "teaching excellence."

Foucault has said the work of intellectuals is

to question over and over again what is postulated as self-evident, to disturb people's mental habits, the way they do and think things, to dissipate what is

familiar and accepted, to reexamine rules and institutions on the basis of this reproblematisation.<sup>26</sup>

The very mechanisms that administrations create for monitoring and developing teaching carry with them resources for faculty to renew their participation in defining the terms under which they teach and work.

The uses and meanings portfolios take on depend largely on the context and reasons for which they are used, a fact that may be one of their greatest strengths and that calls for careful definition of their uses.

To argue that portfolio development be used to encourage reflection on university values is consonant with understandings of a mission of higher education as one of questioning assumptions underlying what appears to be given, engaging in scholarly exchange, and thus enacting education's fundamentally social vision and purposes. ■

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Zubizarreta, 1994. The link between faculty development and administrative evaluation is clearly articulated in Seldin's, 1991, early work on portfolios in which he describes pressures for accountability as the impetus to shift institutional reward structures and document teaching.

<sup>2</sup> Wolf, 1991, 130.

<sup>3</sup> For descriptions and examples of materials included in teaching portfolios, see Centra, 1994; Edgerton et al., 1991; Ross et al., 1995; Seldin and Associates, 1993; Seldin, Annis, and

Zubizarreta, 1995; Wolf, 1991; and Zubizarreta, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Barton and Collins, 1993, 202.

<sup>5</sup> Seldin, Annis, and Zubizarreta, 1995, 242.

<sup>6</sup> Wolf, Whinery, and Hagerty, 1995, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Zubizarreta, 1994, 326.

<sup>8</sup> Ross et al., 1995, 52.

<sup>9</sup> Shulman, 1986.

<sup>10</sup> Seldin, Annis, and Zubizarreta, 1995, 238. This "doubly" developmental aspect of portfolios lends itself particularly well to institutional desires to "socialize" new and junior faculty (see Cox, 1995, 283-310).

- <sup>11</sup> Seldin, 1991, 1.
- <sup>12</sup> Edgerton et al., 1991, 7.
- <sup>13</sup> Seldin, 1991, ix. For discussion of portfolios in administrative contexts, see Froh, Gray, and Lambert, 1993. As examples of the standardization of contents in the context of evaluation and accountability, see the chapters "How Portfolios are Used in Nine Institutions" (written by faculty and administrators) and "Evaluating Teaching Portfolios for Personnel Decisions" (27-70 and 71-86) in Seldin and Associates, 1993.
- <sup>14</sup> Centra, 1994, 557.
- <sup>15</sup> Wolf, 1991, 136; Centra, 1994, 569.
- <sup>16</sup> Foucault, 1977, 189.
- <sup>17</sup> See his discussion of Bentham's Panopticon, a penal architectural design that allowed for the continual surveillance of prisoners such that their behaviors were altered by their consciousness of perpetually potentially being monitored, 195-228.
- <sup>18</sup> Foucault, 1978, 58.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.
- <sup>20</sup> McCutcheon and Jung, 1990, 148. I draw the following distinctions of action research primarily from McCutcheon and Jung and Anderson and Irvine, 1993.
- <sup>21</sup> See, for example, Angelo and Cross, 1993.
- <sup>22</sup> Brookfield, 1995, 40.
- <sup>23</sup> Readings, 1996, 132.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 130, 134.
- <sup>26</sup> In Kritzman, 1988, 265.
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