

Teaching Portfolios and the Quality Enhancement Project in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper examines the potential of teaching portfolios in higher education for educational development and academic staff promotion purposes. In particular it considers the specific challenges in "research-led" institutions. Given concerns about increasing measures of performance, workload monitoring, the changing nature of academic practice and career progression such work, we believe, is timely and appropriate. There has been a widespread adoption of teaching portfolios as a 'measure' of teaching quality (or performance) without due regard to implicit assumptions about their rational, effectiveness and limitations.

Key Words: Teaching Portfolios, Teaching and Learning, Higher Education, Research-Teaching Nexus

Introduction

This paper constitutes part of a wider study of teaching portfolios, peer evaluation and career progression in higher education funded in part by the Higher Education Authority (Strategic Initiatives) and originally undertaken in partnership with the Centre for Teaching at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and the National University of Ireland, Galway.

Teaching Portfolios are essentially documents which provide information and collated evidence of the teaching practice of a member of academic staff, underpinned (in most cases) by a reflective narrative. Usually, a statement of "teaching philosophy" is included which provides scope for the author to outline their view of learning and teaching and link this to their own practice, wider literature and understandings of teaching both generically and with specific reference to their particular academic discipline. Many examples and formats exist, but there is general agreement on the basic constituent components (see for example, Seldin, 2004).

A fairly typical example from the US might consist of the following types of items:

- A teaching statement that discusses the candidate's current research, teaching, and other academic activities and plans.
- A summary of teaching commitments with course titles, numbers, units, and enrolments.
- A description of any pedagogical innovations or course development activities in which the faculty member has participated.
- Copies of all standardized course evaluation summaries.
- Peer review summaries, if available.
- Letters from former undergraduate and graduate students about the candidate's teaching effectiveness. (These letters are solicited by the department.)' (QR.9, U.S.)¹

Whilst in Irish, UK, European and Australian examples there may be less emphasis on the last of these items and more focus on reflection in the initial statement/narrative.

Portfolios are now in widespread use in the higher education sector in Ireland, having gained a foothold in the promotions and awards frameworks for academic staff since the early 2000s. In early initiatives at UCC (Lyons, Hyland & Ryan, 2002), portfolios were first introduced as a means of encouraging the development of both the scholarship of teaching (Boyer, 1990) and approaches to teaching development based on reflective practice (Schön, 1983). Portfolio submissions have since become required in applications for promotion to senior lectureships and/or teaching excellence award schemes in most Irish universities (MacLaren, 2005).

Since the mid 1990s, however, most new academic staff in Ireland have necessarily focused their interests on research, often in line with national and institutional ambitions and funding policies. Permanent positions and the likelihood of promotion depend on published research output and the generation of significant external income (particularly in science, engineering and medicine). Some new academics perceive teaching as an additional, unavoidable burden — or it can feel this way, given the “research hothouse” context in which they find themselves. Moreover, universities have developed specialist research centres and institutes, funding has been provided to attract leaders in the field to relocate to Ireland, and the term “fourth-level Ireland” has attained common currency as well as being identified as a national priority.

In all this rapid development, it is sometimes hard to identify exactly the position of “third-level” teaching and learning. Where stands a lecturer whose primary commitment is to teaching excellence? How can teaching activity not only be valued by individual academics (including those who are research driven) but also unquestionably integrated into ‘routine’ academic practice? As we can see from the experience of other countries, there are dangers in separating teaching from research to the extent of having different staff responsible for each. Indeed, there are links between research and teaching that have not yet been fully exploited so such an environment of separation, it is felt by many, would lead to a poorer undergraduate learning experience.

We face many challenges, therefore, in contemporary higher education, and it is important to realise that this is the context in which teaching portfolios have appeared. As a result, there is significant tension between their uses as evaluative or managerial tools and as

instruments of change and reflective practice. Is there a way in which we can bridge this gap and use portfolios to encourage and promote the idea of an academic practice that spans teaching, research, community and wider scholarly activity?

Methodology

A comprehensive literature review was undertaken on the use of teaching portfolios in higher education for both formative (e.g. fostering a more reflective approach to individual teaching practice) and summative (e.g. as evidence for a case for promotion or teaching award) purposes. In the course of conducting the review a number of higher education professionals (such as those in Teaching Centres, serving on promotion panels, working in quality, staff development, etc) with expertise or substantial experience in the use of teaching portfolios were identified and contacted by email (and in some cases by telephone) to exchange views and opinions. Some 42 such correspondents contributed to this discussion and their comments were collated and analysed. Subsequently, and building on this work, a questionnaire was developed which was then issued to a number of additional colleagues at various institutions (most of which would at least consider themselves as "research-led" or "research active" universities). Twenty-four such questionnaires were completed (note that the intention was for detailed qualitative reflections rather than statistical analysis/categorisation so the target number issued was also small)

The information gleaned from the literature survey, the correspondence and the questionnaires provides an excellent basis for the development of a framework for understanding both the potential and the actual impact of teaching portfolios on academic staff career progression and the development of individual reflective practice in higher education.

Teaching Portfolios and Assessment²

The literature distinguishes between teaching portfolios that are used for summative and formative purposes (Centra, 1994; Felder and Brent, 1996; Knapper and Wright, 2001; Murray, 1995 and Seldin, 2004). It is perhaps obvious that when they are used for summative purposes their formative potential can be short-circuited (Babin *et al.*, 2002; Centra, 1994; Dyrud, 1997; Edgerton, 1991 and Felder and Brent, 1996). Academic staff who put themselves forward for promotion will naturally be reluctant to identify weaknesses or discuss unsuccessful teaching practices, despite the fact that such critical self-reflection, it could be argued, is integral to professional development (Babin *et al.*, 2002; Centra, 1994; Cleary and Stuhldreher, 1997; Knapper and Wright, 2001; McAlpine *et al.*, 1999; McLean and Bullard, 2000; Murray, 1995; Tigelaar *et al.*, 2005 and Wright, 1999).

In the context of a "research-led" institution of higher education³ then, a pivotal question for consideration is how might it be possible to introduce teaching portfolios for summative purposes such as tenure and promotion without also losing their potential to stimulate a good deal of reflection about teaching (Knapper and Wright, 2001; Murphy and MacLaren, 2007; Seldin, 2004 and Way, 2002)? The responses to this question in our consultations and questionnaires are divided into those who see real potential in combining both aspects and

those who argue that these two purposes are fundamentally at variance and hence should be addressed via different mechanisms.

One of the respondents claimed that ‘summative instruments may be used for formative purposes but not the reverse’ (QR.14, Irl.).⁴ However, another challenged this assumption, echoing Knapper and Wright’s (2001, p. 25) claim that the differences between the summative and the formative portfolio are ‘not as great as might be expected’. In support reference was made to Snyder, Lippincott & Bower’s (1998) conclusion that ‘reconciliation is possible when the assessment can be based on a broad archive of portfolio evidence gathered over a longer period of time from which the teacher can select evidence for specific assessment purposes’ (EM.20, Eur.). Nevertheless, she did recognise that ‘high-stake assessment will sabotage professional development because it obstructs teachers experimenting in their teaching’ and that conversely ‘portfolio evidence for formative assessment purposes might be of insufficient quality to meet minimal acceptable quality requirements for high stake assessment (EM.20, Eur.).

It is clear that there are particular challenges in using portfolios for judgemental and even comparative assessment of candidates for promotion (Baume and Yorke, 2002; Casey et al., 1997 and Tigelaar et al., 2005). Variations abound in what is considered “high quality teaching,” for example, in different courses, between different subject areas, and even within subject areas (Babin et al., 2002; Casey et al., 1997 and Kreber, 2002). Such assessment leaves ‘the question open to what extent the interpretation of these evaluations would require a conversation about how the assessment categories reflect the standards of the various disciplines. This in turn would require a broad conversation about discipline-based teaching standards in addition to general standards’ (QR.9, U.S.). Dyrud (1997) goes so far as to suggest that it is comparing ‘Apples and Oranges’.

There are additional concerns about any “grading” or “ranking” schemes that might be employed in terms of reliability, consistency, objectivity and comparability (Moss, 1994; Murray, 1995 and Ross et al., 1995). Given their subjective nature, ‘creating criteria, ensuring consistency and reviewing, even for a Pass/Fail result, can be challenging and often problematic activities’ (QR.12, Irl.).

Concerns such as these underscore the importance of establishing an approach ‘that enables assessors to interpret meaning in context and that will have a positive effect on the intended assessment consequences’ (Tigelaar et al., 2005, p. 602). Both Baume and Yorke (2002: 17), for example, emphasise that ‘reliability is enhanced when there are explicit outcome standards against which to judge, and when there are clear and unambiguous performance data upon which to exercise that judgment’. Even Knapper and Wright (2001), who are very conscious about not forcing portfolios into a quantitative paradigm, still recognise the importance of establishing clear criteria for judging them. They also propose that that it is very helpful to involve the teaching community in the process of determining the appropriate criteria, whether at the institutional, school, or department level (2001, p. 27) (see also Casey et al., 1997; Felder and Brent, 1996 and Ross et al., 1995).

Ross et al. (1995), who conducted an analysis of 73 award-winning portfolios at the University of Florida concluded that it was feasible to conceive of a generic framework for the systematic presentation of data on the nature, quantity and quality of teaching. Tigelaar et al. (2005) specify the parameters for such a generic framework. They contend that it is very

important not to be overly prescriptive and in their view, assessors should be able ‘to continually challenge and revise their emerging interpretations until they have considered all the available evidence’ (2005, p. 606).

The importance of clearly specifying the criteria by which the teaching portfolios will be assessed was frequently raised by the respondents. In practice, however, they note that ‘quite often neither the candidates nor the assessors are clear about the content and performance standards’ (QR.17, Eur.). To address this problem, ‘teachers and their assessors could create criteria together thus making the assessed partners rather than adversaries’ (QR.20, U.S.). It might also be possible, according to one respondent, to ask Heads of Department/Chairs ‘to outline the standards of their field so that the assessors of tenure committees who come from different fields understand what constitutes excellent teaching in a specific discipline on a national as well as departmental level’ (QR.9, U.S.).

It is also acknowledged that the establishment of trust between both the assessors and their candidates is essential for the successful introduction of teaching portfolios (Murray, 1995; Seldin, 2004 and Way, 2002). Tigelaar et al. (2005, p. 603-604) put this succinctly where they contend that:

‘The building of trust between assessors and the teachers who are assessed and paying attention to the concerns of the latter as well as involving them in the assessment procedures and debates on interpretations will promote deeper thinking about teaching and subject matter and help teachers to become more self-confident about teaching practice, which will influence their classroom practice in various ways.’

Building this trust is necessary for establishing a favourable institutional climate for the introduction of teaching portfolios.

Teaching Portfolios and “Critical Reflectivity”

“Critical Reflectivity” is about opening up knowledge claims “to proper intellectual challenge” (Andresen, 2000). It is suggested that teaching portfolios may be particularly appropriate for promoting this ethos because their construction requires reflection on ‘what one teaches, how one teaches, why one teaches that way, how effective that is, and, if necessary or desired, effectively communicating that to others’ (Babin, 2002). As van Manen (1991, p. 19) points out, such engagement allows us ‘to make our pedagogical lives conversationally available: debatable, accountable, evaluable’. It also encourages practitioners to conduct research on their own sites of practice that will allow them to develop their own contextually sensitive theories of practice (Brookfield, 1995). McLean and Bullard (2000, p. 94) confirm these sentiments in the following statement where they contend that portfolios:

‘which are produced in contexts in which critical reflective practice, authenticity, and serious engagement with ideas about the teaching/learning relationship are promoted may have the potential both to stimulate teachers to articulate and improve their practice and to be a contribution to understanding the nature of the formation of professional university teachers.’

It is recognised however, from our consultations, that the reflective nature of teaching portfolios does present some distinct challenges for many academic staff since many people are not ‘naturally reflective’ (QR.2, Eng.) and hence find it difficult, at first, to operate in this

mode of writing. There is of course also a lack of agreement in what constitutes "reflection" and "reflective writing" (see e.g. Moon, 2000): 'It is difficult to give an appropriate definition of "reflection", let alone to develop content and performance standards to assess reflection' (QR.17, Eng.). Additionally, there is the added task of trying to distinguish between different *levels of reflection* 'that which includes the testing of validity claims and that which is limited to making explicit one's beliefs (which is in a way nothing more but making an assertion)' (QR.8, Scot.).

All this means, according to another respondent, that 'many teachers from different disciplines do not really know what reflective practice means, and even if they do, they are not always clear about how to operationalise reflective practice within their own contexts' (QR.11, Irl.). This of course implies a similar conceptual and practical challenge for the assessors of portfolios and not just for their authors. One of the respondents pointed to research that she had conducted on the status that is accorded to reflection in higher education. 'According to my own research into this matter, assessors think that explicated reflections are subject to multiple modifications and interpretations and as a result will decrease the validity of a portfolio assessment. For this reason in my research assessors tended to give less weight to reflections in the portfolio than other portfolio elements (e.g. artefacts of teacher behaviour as shown on video, which seems to be more objective)' (QR.17, Eur.).

Teaching Portfolios and the 'Research-Teaching Nexus'

Hattie and Marsh (1996) argued that the common belief that research and teaching are inextricably entwined is an 'enduring myth'. In their view this is partly because researchers and teachers may adopt differing conceptions of *learning* (1996, p. 531). It has been suggested however that the research-teaching gap could be bridged if universities can conceive of learning as consisting of not yet wholly solved problems. In this way then teachers and students are always in research mode (Elton, 2001; Jenkins, *in press* and Neumann, 1994). Perhaps teaching portfolios might facilitate a greater rapprochement between these two dimensions of academic practice.

In our feedback, the suggestion was made that linking the rationale for the introduction of portfolios with the methodology and the language of research might facilitate their wider acceptance. (QR.5, Eng.). The same respondent also pointed out that the use of portfolios in some forms of PhD/graduate learning provides an obvious potential model.

As previously mentioned above however the tilt toward research in higher education can have an adverse effect on efforts to raise the status of teaching. The Research Assessment Exercise, in the UK, for example, 'has driven university strategy for the past 15 years or so and in many places led to teaching as being less important' (QR.2, Eng.). Another respondent added that 'teaching an additional hour remained a negative factor in pay and publishing an extra article a positive factor in pay' (QR.19, U.S.).

The teaching portfolio process could invite candidates to consider how their research is informing their teaching, as well as encouraging them to engage in research about their teaching (QR.3, Irl.). One approach could be 'to take a criterion-led approach which parallels the criteria used in determining research-led promotions so that a perception is created that teaching is as rigorous as research and that those who gain promotion by teaching have

done so through being as significant in that field as researchers are in their fields' (EM.30, Scot.).

It is important to point out however that *teaching portfolios* on their own will not manage to bridge the divide between research and teaching. Suggestions from the consultations included the development of a broader instrument: 'an academic competence portfolio' which would include documentation on teaching competence, research competence, teamwork competence etc. (QR.18, Eur.). A comment backed up by many others: 'not calling them Teaching Portfolios! But something possibly more attractive to researchers: e.g. Portfolio of Academic Practice' (QR.24, Irl.).

Conclusion

This paper has looked at the potential of teaching portfolios for staff development and career progression purposes in higher education. It considered the critical question about how it might be possible to introduce teaching portfolios for mainly summative purposes, such as tenure and promotion, without also losing their potential to stimulate a good deal of reflection about teaching.

A number of key, recurring issues arose as we engaged in consultation and discussion with many practitioners across Europe, the US, Canada, Australia and China. These included:

- Difficulties in the definition of "good teaching"
- Variations between academic disciplines in terms of expectations, cultures and recognised standards
- The challenge of writing and operating as a 'reflective practitioner'
- Consistency, criteria and training for assessors
- Trust, institutional strategy and shared values.

In addition, however, many positive suggestions and comments were made and despite the challenges, it is still felt that portfolios have a strong potential in terms of both fostering a spirit of constructive reflective practice and offering potential frameworks for constructive and comparable approaches to career progression decisions. The critical factors are how the portfolios are structured, assessed and embedded within an institutional culture which gives strong, overt recognition to an academic practice that equally values research and teaching.

Teaching, learning and research should be seen as complementary aspects of an inclusive academic practice, which can be captured, in, reflected on and evaluated using a teaching portfolio. In this way, the institutional goal of a "rounded" academic prevails that avoids ending up with "teaching only" and "research only" staff. The teaching portfolio process then could invite candidates to consider how their research is informing their teaching, as well as encouraging them to engage in research about their teaching. It is important to point out however that teaching portfolios on their own will not manage to bridge the divide between teaching and research. An option might be to consider the development of a broader

instrument, such as an academic competence portfolio which would include documentation on teaching competence, research competence, teamwork competence.

Notes

¹ EM- email; QR – Questionnaire Response; US, Eur, Eng, Aus, etc are country abbreviations.

²Note that because of the international nature of our consultations the term 'assessment' is often used in place of 'evaluation'

³And by this we simply mean one in which it is at least internally acknowledged that high levels of research activity is not just a strategic priority, but for which there is an institutional history of recognising research output as the central factor in seeking academic promotion,

⁴ QR = Questionnaire Response; EM = Email discussions, Irl, Eur, UK, NIRL, are self-explanatory country/continent codes.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Questionnaire

Name:

Institution:

Email:

1. To what extent are Teaching Portfolios used as a means for providing an evidence base for decisions on academic career development and promotion at your institution?

2. Could you comment on the importance of specifying the intended outcome(s) of its introduction i.e. whether it is for formative or summative purposes or both

- 3a) Could you comment on some of the assessment challenges that could

potentially result from introducing Teaching Portfolios for academic career progression purposes at research-led institutions for (i) the candidate and (ii) the assessor(s)

- b) Could you briefly outline the mechanisms that could be put in place to address some of the assessment challenges mentioned above
4. Could you comment on any other possible implementation barriers that could potentially limit the effectiveness of introducing Teaching Portfolios for academic progression purposes?
5. Does the introduction of Teaching Portfolios for academic progression purposes need to take cognisance of the current debates about the relative importance of Research vis a viz Teaching on our campuses? Can such portfolios potentially help to expand our conceptions about the possible inter-relatedness of research and teaching?
6. Reflection is regarded as pivotal to the Teaching Portfolio process. Could you comment briefly on some of the challenges and opportunities for reflection in the teaching portfolio process.
7. Outline any recommendations that you think could be helpful for the introduction of Teaching Portfolios at research-led institutions of higher education.
8. Any other suggestions or comments
9. Personal, confidential feedback

Appendix B

List of Higher Education Institutions involved in the research:

Republic of Ireland:

Dublin City University

National University of Ireland, Galway

Trinity College, Dublin

University College Cork

University College Dublin

University of Limerick

United Kingdom:

University of Bath, England

University of Caledonia, Scotland

University of Cambridge, England

University of Derby, England

University of East Anglia, England
University of Edinburgh, Scotland
University of Glasgow, Scotland
University of Kent
University of Leeds
University of Liverpool
University of Manchester, England
Liverpool John Moores University, England
Loughborough University, England
Marylebone University, Wales
Napier University, Scotland
Nottingham University, England
Oxford Brookes University, England
University of Reading, England
University of Sheffield, England
Southampton Solent University, England
University of Stratclyde, Scotland
University of Ulster, Northern Ireland

Continental Europe:

University of Bergen, Norway
Leiden University, The Netherlands
Utrecht University, The Netherlands

United States:

Columbia University, New York
University of Kansas
University of Massachusetts, Amherst
Stanford University

Canada:

McGill University

Australia:

University of Sydney

China:

University of Hong Kong

Other:

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Carrick Institute of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, NSW, Australia
The Higher Education Academy, England

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