

Teaching Portfolios for Improvement and Evaluation of Honors Teaching

by John Zubizarreta

The national movement in higher education toward the use of teaching portfolios for improvement of teaching, personnel decisions, and other crucial activities of the professoriate is now at an unprecedented height. The portfolio or dossier has been an integral part of teaching enhancement and evaluation in Canadian institutions since the seventies, and although a few isolated American practitioners have experimented with various instruments that approximate the portfolio, it has taken a decade or more before the concept has found firm root in American academia through the key efforts and endorsements of distinguished educators and scholars such as Boyer of the Carnegie Foundation; Edgerton, Hutchings, and Quinlan of the American Association for Higher Education; Cheney of the National Endowment for the Humanities; and Seldin, the most articulate and prolific American advocate of portfolios. Seldin's two books — *The Teaching Portfolio: A Practical Guide to Improved Performance and Promotion/Tenure Decisions* (1991) and *Successful Use of Teaching Portfolios* (1993) — are currently the texts of choice for faculty and administrators interested in learning how to write portfolios for personal improvement or interested in exploring ways of using portfolios for faculty development; for tenure and promotion considerations; for conferring teaching awards, merit pay, and release time; for screening of job candidates; or for funding of professional enhancement projects, fellowships, and grants, to name a few of the versatile applications of the teaching portfolio. As Seldin points out in his recent book, "[A]s many as 400 colleges and universities in the United States are now using or experimenting with portfolios. That is a stunning jump from the approximately 75 institutions thought to be using portfolios just two years ago" (1993, p. 4). Clearly, Savory is right when he says that the portfolio is a concept "whose time has come" (*Successful Use*, 1993, p. 31).

The time has come, too, in honors for a versatile, comprehensive instrument that can be used by honors faculty to describe, analyze, document, and evaluate the particular enterprise of honors teaching. Honors teachers need a proven vehicle for improvement and an honest,

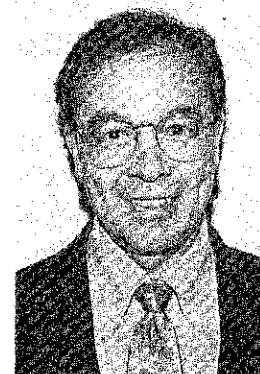
reliable means of providing evidence of successful honors teaching. And directors need a tool for valid, formative evaluation of their programs' courses and faculty. A portfolio written specifically for honors courses can help both teachers and administrators identify, study, and enhance the unique philosophies, methods, materials, student and peer or administrative reviews, outcomes, and goals of honors teaching. The efficacy of portfolio writing is realized especially when an honors director and an honors teacher collaborate to study a portfolio's varied, useful information about one course. Such a portfolio adds significant value to a teacher's overall professional growth and unique contributions to honors.

What Is a Teaching Portfolio?

Specific and ample information about the content and format of portfolios, along with models from across academic disciplines, can be found in Seldin's books, but a brief description may identify the teaching portfolio as an evidence-based written document in which a faculty member concisely organizes details of teaching accomplishment and effort. Most effective portfolios written as a wide profile of teaching in general are about eight or ten double-spaced pages that include (among other possible choices which insure a portfolio's highly individualized signature) seminal statements on teaching responsibilities, philosophy, methods, singular strategies and initiatives, materials, student and peer ratings, student products, awards, and goals. A table of contents identifies the major headings of the portfolio, and if the purpose of the portfolio is *improvement of teaching*, the table may favor description, analysis, experimental efforts, diagnostic review, and goals:

Table of Contents (*for improvement*)

1. Teaching Responsibilities in Honors
2. Statement of Teaching Philosophy
3. Analysis of Methods, Strategies Special to Honors
4. Description and Study of Honors Course Materials: Syllabuses, Assignments, Handouts
5. Efforts to Improve Teaching:



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- Conferences, Workshops, Curricular Revisions, Experiments in Pedagogy and Methodology
6. Examination of Student Ratings on Diagnostic Questions and of Peer Reviews of Honors Teaching
 7. Honors Teaching Goals: Short Term and Long Term
 8. Appendices.

With improvement in mind, some professors write a short portfolio for a specific course which they wish to strengthen, modifying the table of contents only slightly and adding, perhaps, a discussion of abiding efforts to perfect the various dimensions of the course. Discussion is the key to improvement, for writing becomes the vehicle for action, the recorded impetus for real change.

If the purpose of the portfolio is to describe and document teaching performance for *evaluation*, the table may alter slightly to place more strategic emphasis on assessment from a variety of sources that go beyond the limited perspective of student evaluation forms, often the only narrow evidence supplied by faculty trying to make a case for teaching achievement:

Table of Contents (*for evaluation*)

1. Teaching Responsibilities in Honors
2. Statement of Teaching Philosophy
3. Methods, Strategies in Honors
4. Student Evaluations and Letters
5. Peer Evaluations and Letters from Colleagues Who Have Observed Classroom Performance and Reviewed Course Materials and Student Work
6. Statements by the Department Chair, Honors Director, or Other Administrative Heads, Assessing the Professor's Teaching Contributions
7. Detailed, Representative Course Syllabuses, Assignments, Handouts
8. Specific Products of Student Learning: Exams, Projects, Student Conference Presentations and Publications, Essays in Drafts with Professor's Comments, Evidence of Successful Student Practicums and Professional Achievement Tied to Professor's Teaching, Etc.
9. Teaching Awards, Recognition
10. Teaching Goals: Short Term and Long Term
11. Appendices

Again, Seldin's books are excellent sources of ideas for other items that may be included in a soundly written portfolio that selectively and

judiciously gathers representative information from oneself, from others, and from the products of engaged, successful teaching. One may also consult AAHE publications on portfolios (1991, 1993), especially more recent documents that have come to conform more closely to the succinct, convincing model developed by Seldin. More suggestions of what may be added to a portfolio are cited by Shore and the Canadian Association of University Teachers in *The Teaching Dossier: A Guide to Its Preparation and Use* (1986), and O'Neil and Wright's *Recording Teaching Accomplishment: A Dalhousie Guide to the Teaching Dossier* (1991) is available on diskette from their university's Office of Instructional Development and Technology.

Regardless of purpose or signature items that individualize each portfolio according to varied teaching values, styles, and academic disciplines, the narrative body of the portfolio affords all faculty an opportunity for reflection about *what* and *how* we teach but more importantly *why*, an essential critical process culminating in an act of writing that has its own intrinsic worth in enhancing the quality of teaching in honors because of the difficulty honors teachers often have in articulating exactly what differentiates an honors course from others.

But the portfolio also must include a valuable appendix of articles that document and support the narrative, offering outside readers the hard copy information and evidence necessary for complete and valid assessment. Again, honors teachers can benefit from a portfolio's process of careful, thorough documentation in an appendix, a process that provides evidence and outcomes of honors teaching and learning. In addition, a successful, well-rounded portfolio balances 1) materials from oneself, 2) materials from others, and 3) products of student learning. Materials from oneself come rather easily to faculty writing portfolios because we control information such as statements of responsibilities, philosophy, and methodologies; syllabuses and goals are similarly ours to conceive and write. Materials from others are mostly out of our control, since they are comprised, for example, of student and peer or administrative formative and summative evaluations and descriptive comments by colleagues within and without our respective departments and institutions. The most difficult area to address is the products of good teaching, which is why authentic and rigorous assessment is such a

bugaboo to all teachers but especially to honors faculty who should be able to demonstrate that what their students produce — that is, the outcomes of their learning — is honors work. However, products of student learning — hard evidence of the impact of a teacher's educational intervention in students' work and progress — must be a vital component in a portfolio that attempts to define either the wide scope of teaching accomplishment or the unique qualities of honors instruction and honors students' learning.

In bringing into focus and in documenting the three broad areas, the portfolio becomes an instrument that effectively provides a fair and practical profile of teaching, much the same way that a detailed curriculum vitae with accompanying letters of endorsement and with offprints of publications documents a faculty member's academic credentials, research, and service. The same strategy that goes into developing a general teaching portfolio may be applied to composing a complementary portfolio for the distinctive honors teaching venture, especially if such a portfolio is integrally tied to a clear set of standards and goals defined by an honors program and articulated clearly in its mission statement. In a sense, then, honors portfolio writing is strategic planning in honors — a comprehensive articulation of mission or philosophy, a current assessment of competencies, a statement of objectives, a map of how to achieve goals, and a bank of supportive documentation — the kind of planning that results in better honors teaching, better communication between directors and faculty, and more supportive evaluation of honors education.

Issues to Consider About an Honors Portfolio

1. Is the portfolio written for an honors course a lengthy, exhaustive document?
2. What is the guarantee that a portfolio is not comprised of culled and biased information, that it does not circumvent poor teaching in honors?
3. Does a gifted writer have a distinct advantage because of developed communication skills?
4. How does one maintain the integrity of the portfolio written for enhancement purposes only?
5. Is the portfolio a totally subjective document that cannot be used for valid assessment?
6. The portfolio concept undoubtedly is useful to junior faculty, but would experienced

senior faculty have any motivation to write one?

7. How important are student outcomes of learning in a portfolio?
8. Does a portfolio benefit faculty or directors? Who should initiate the portfolio process?

Getting Started

One of the best ways to get started on a portfolio is to develop a series of seminal questions or topics that merit the professor's careful reflection and analysis. Once such drafting is complete, the information translates effectively into the narrative portion of the portfolio. Next, the faculty member begins the process of collecting selective evidence to include in the appendices. Here are examples of some vital questions:

1. Identify one strategy or a particular assignment that you believe is particularly effective in an honors course you teach.
 - What is the purpose of the strategy or the assignment?
 - Why do you use such methodology or materials?
 - What value is your method or assignment to student learning?
2. How is your method or assignment special to honors?
3. If you overheard students talking about your honors course, what would they say about its value to honors?

Conclusion

The portfolio is not the only means of describing and documenting teaching effort in honors, but it is the only instrument that serves both to evaluate performance in a framework of description and evidence and to improve teaching through the process of reflective writing and self-scrutiny. In writing a portfolio for a particular honors class, a faculty member feels empowered to think about teaching the course, a seemingly obvious, elementary but vital component of improvement. 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. The instructor also learns the value of collaboration as opposed to self-serving competition in defining responsibilities, discussing values and methods, providing substantive supportive information, and delineating goals. Working together with

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an honors director or with an honors colleague in shaping the portfolio, the professor engages in a mentoring process that strengthens the program. Also, in becoming a thoughtful practitioner, the faculty member becomes more intentional in generating actual products of good honors teaching, making students the real beneficiaries of the work that goes into a portfolio. Finally, the portfolio stands to change the way honors teaching is not only defined and assessed but valued in the institution, reclaiming the significance of creative, experimental, honors teaching in faculty roles; encouraging continual reexamination of disciplinary pedagogy and teaching methodology as they relate to and inform honors education; and promoting real evidence of improvement, vitality, and intellectual growth. It is an idea whose time has come in honors.

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