Chapter 6

# The Role of Teaching Portfolios in the Development of a Reflective Learning Culture at Dublin City University

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This chapter charts the introduction of teaching portfolios at Dublin City University (DCU). It describes some pre-portfolio research, which was conducted to inform the development and introduction of portfolios, as well as the approach eventually adopted. It concludes by outlining the challenges and outcomes of the two courses in which the portfolio has featured to date.

## Context

As the newest Irish university (established in November 1980), DCU is better placed than most to respond to a continuously shifting higher education (HE) environment. Since its inauguration, DCU has been a pioneering higher education institution with its flagship industrial training programme (INTRA), in which students spend one semester of their degrees working in industry. DCU has always been highly innovative in forging strong partnerships and collaborations with industry. In 2005, DCU launched its new strategic plan *Leadership through Foresight*, using a new and innovative planning methodology, with a particular focus on 'being a distinctive agent of radical innovation, within a culture of world class excellence in higher education and scholarship' (DCU 2005). With this background, DCU continues to be the kind of learning organisation suggested by Fullan (1993).

The notion of the university as a learning organisation has had a profound influence on the ethos underpinning the DCU Learning Innovation (LI) Strategic Plan, a component plan of Leadership Through Foresight, launched in December 2005. This Plan emphasises the development of a culture of research-led or inquiry-based learning, which will encourage the development of students' abilities to approach their learning through questioning, research and reflection. Reflective learning is central to any such culture, and we consider that academic staff must become reflective practitioners if they are to foster this approach to learning among their students. Scholars agree that reflective teaching portfolios are a powerful—if not essential—tool for the reflective practitioner (see Seldin 1991; Lyons 1998). Thus, the LI Plan states as one of its key objectives that 'all staff will be supported in the development of teaching portfolios to enable them to become more reflective practitioners' (OVPLI, 2005, p. 27).

The introduction of teaching portfolios required that we take account of the autonomy and individuality of individual teachers, while also seeking to contribute to an organisation-wide change of culture, especially the development of a culture of inquiry-based and research-led learning. In this, we were guided by Fullan's (1993) characterisation of teachers as change agents and his argument that individual

change must occur in parallel with organisational change. In other words, we aimed to contribute to change at the whole-of-university level by effecting change in classroom and academic development practices.

## Pre-Portfolio Evaluation

We undertook pre-portfolio interviews with five nursing lecturers to inform our approach to the introduction of teaching portfolios (Hughes 2006). We focused on nursing lecturers because of their likely familiarity with reflective practice and because teachers in this field have usually previously completed formal training in teaching or tutoring, usually involving the use of teaching portfolios. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, which addressed three major areas: reflective practice, teaching in DCU and teaching portfolios. In relation to teaching portfolios, we asked the lecturers four closed questions:

1. Should DCU introduce teaching portfolios?
2. Have you ever had a teaching portfolio?
3. Do you currently have a teaching portfolio?
4. Do you know anyone with a teaching portfolio?

The responses to these questions are summarised in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Responses to Closed Questions about Teaching Portfolios**

| Interviewee | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Y | N | N | N |
| 2 | Y | Y | N | N |
| 3 | Y | Y | N | N |
| 4 | Y | Y | N | N |
| 5 | Y | Y | Y | Y |

It should be noted that three of the four interviewees who had maintained a portfolio (Q2) had done so in the context of a formal education programme. Interestingly, none of these respondents continued to maintain a teaching portfolio after the programme, and this presents an interesting challenge with respect to building continuity and longevity into the portfolio process. The one interviewee who actually kept a portfolio (Q3) did so in the form of a plan or scheme of work rather than a reflective portfolio.

We also asked interviewees about the:

- usefulness of portfolios
- relative advantages and disadvantages of a portfolio template or proforma
- likely usefulness of a formal course to introduce teaching portfolios.

From these open-ended discussions, a picture emerged of the role that teaching portfolios could play in acknowledging effective teaching practice. Interviewees felt that effective practice was not necessarily recognised because it can be difficult to demonstrate, especially when compared with research excellence. Thus teaching portfolios were seen as a way of not only improving teaching practice through reflection but also as a way of demonstrating improvement and quality. On a related point, interviewees saw teaching portfolios as a strategy for balancing the competing demands of teaching and research.

Interviewees provided useful feedback on the format that teaching portfolios should take at DCU. They all felt that some form of template was needed to help structure portfolios and generate entries, but each also stressed that such a template must allow for individual tailoring and customisation.

## Objectives of Portfolio Development

These interviews made it clear to us that teaching portfolios at DCU needed to address several objectives in addition to the overarching strategic objective of developing a reflective learning culture. They needed to:

- provide a means of demonstrating or evidencing teaching excellence
- facilitate a reflective approach to improvement of teaching practice
- promote pedagogical research.

## Portfolio Construction

Our approach to the introduction of and support for teaching portfolios at DCU was informed by the objectives of the strategic plan, the interviews with nursing lecturers and the relevant scholarly literature (Kolb 1984; Seldin 1991; Lyons 1998). To help us, we engaged an educational consultant, Ivan Moore, from the Centre for Excellence in Enquiry-based Learning at Manchester University.

Our approach had two strands: the development of a suitable model or models for the portfolio and the development of a support structure in the form of a formal portfolio course.

## Portfolio Models

Given the feedback we had received about accommodating individual teaching practices and needs, we developed three possible portfolio models for use by academics at DCU:

- critical incident  framework (cellular and case study approach)
- continuous professional development framework (CPD) (cellular and case study approach)
- Boyer's scholarships (cellular and case study approach).

The *critical incident* model is primarily for those individuals whose main goal is to examine, reflect on and improve their own practice by examining particular events,

or 'critical incidents'. 'Critical incidents are vivid happenings that for some reason people remember as being significant' (Brookfield 1995, p. 114). They change what happens after them. This model provides people interested in critical incidents with a framework to structure their reflection.

The *continuous professional development framework* (CPD) model adapts the UK Higher Education Academy (HE Academy) framework for professional standards. This framework identifies six areas of activity, six areas of core knowledge and five professional values (Higher Education Academy 2006). It is likely to be of particular use to those individuals who wish to use their portfolios as evidence in support of an application for advancement or award.

The model based on Boyer's *scholarships* combines reflective investigation into teaching practice with Boyer's four scholarships: discovery, integration, application and teaching. Individuals using this model are encouraged to view teaching 'problems' in the same way as research problems—as the starting points for inquiry (Bass 1998, cited by Hutchings & Schulman 1999). Thus this model supports a scholarly, research-led approach to learning and teaching.

When teachers take a *cellular approach* to any of the models above, they enter reflective comments about specific incidents or areas into cells on a matrix. The *case study approach* involves focusing on a longer-term experience, such as a whole module or programme. Further information about these models and associated approaches is provided in the chapter by Jean Hughes and Ivan Moore.

## Portfolio Course

The course to support teachers in developing portfolios is organised around four facilitated group sessions, each taking the form of an action learning set—that is, a small group of learners (three to four people) whose focus is on learning through and about their common practice. Facilitators provide some input into these sessions, helping participants to focus on reflection and evaluation, rather than description. They encourage the use of evidence of the impact of teachers' actions and decisions on student learning, and help participants to link research into student learning (that is, the scholarly literature) and their reflective writing. More information is provided in the chapter by Jean Hughes and Ivan Moore.

## Challenges of Portfolio Development

When we introduced teaching portfolios and ran the portfolio course for the first time, we experienced challenges in relation to structure, timing and operation. The experience of the first course has informed the second.

## Timing

We ran the course for the first time towards the end of the academic year, between May and June 2006, when teachers were no longer taking classes. We hoped that this would mean that teachers would be free from timetabling constraints and, although busy correcting exams, would be available to attend the course sessions.

Two main problems became evident. Because teachers were not timetabled, other meetings were also scheduled, often at short notice. It therefore proved impossible for all participants to attend all the sessions. Thus we began the course with twelve participants, but only six of these attended the final session.

The second problem was of even more fundamental importance: because the course was conducted outside teaching time, it meant that participants were reflecting-on-action rather than reflecting-in-action (see Schön 1983).

The second course ran during core teaching time, with its four sessions scheduled between October 2006 and January 2007. Sixteen participants signed up for the course: fourteen attended the first session and ten completed the course). This arrangement proved much more successful than the first course. Participants came with fresh, current incidents or case studies; they identified their chosen models; and they all made entries in their portfolios between sessions. An additional benefit of running the course during teaching time is that participants could meet between sessions, because they are generally available on the day and time that a session normally runs and they reported valuable peer support as an outcome.

## Portfolio Models

In the first course, we presented participants with the three alternative portfolio models and associated approaches in the first session. With hindsight, it is clear that this was probably overwhelming for the participants, although we did not assume that they would be familiar with reflective practice, Boyer's scholarships or the role of Higher Education Academy. We did give them some background for understanding these models, but they nevertheless had to grapple not only with the differences between the models but also with deciding which was the most relevant for them. Although we made it clear that participants could change models at any stage, it probably would have been simpler to limit them to one or two models until they were comfortable with the process of portfolio development.

In the second course, we briefly mentioned the three possible models during the first session but limited participants to using the critical incident model, with a choice of either the cellular or case study approach. We introduced the other models towards the end of the course and assistance will be given to teachers who wish to adapt their critical incident portfolio to an alternative template. In addition, participants in the second course had the opportunity (and were encouraged) to attend a workshop on reflective learning given by Dr Jennifer Moon in September 2006. This allowed them to gain information on and some practice in reflective writing and proved a useful context for the portfolio course.

## Structure

As noted above, each session in the portfolio course is designed around action learning sets, with some input from a facilitator. Each set is supposed to discuss portfolio development; identify any issues arising; monitor individual progress; and report back to the whole group. In general, participants followed this model but the

working of the action learning sets and the facilitator input varied significantly between the first and second courses.

In the first course, individuals tended to use the sessions for general discussion of teaching issues and problems: this was undoubtedly useful but it is not clear that it necessarily advanced portfolio development. In part, this may have been caused by the composition of the groups changing from week to week. Moreover, participants had not been asked to meet in between sessions, so sessions began with an informal check-in to see how participants had progressed between times. Generally, this set an informal tone and it was quite difficult to switch back to the more formal, structured session. Finally, facilitators decided on the topics for formal discussion because participants did not request topics, despite being invited to do so.

In the second course, the sets appeared to work more effectively, with individuals meeting in between sessions. As noted above, the scheduling of this course has contributed to effectiveness in this area. The mixture of formal input and small group work seemed to work better too, because we began each session with some formal input from the facilitator before moving into the action learning sets. Finally, participants in this second course themselves requested topics for each session, ranging from educational theories to student learning styles.

## Mentors

To support participants in the first course, we provided them with mentors. All the mentors except one came from other Irish higher education institutions (this was because of the limited experience of DCU staff with reflective portfolios). Mentors were extremely generous with both their time and their interest, but experience with this form of mentoring was mixed. Participants who contacted their mentors reported very favourably on the individual mentors. The only negative feedback was from the mentors, who sometimes contacted us to say that the participants were not making enough use of them. Interestingly, mentees of the DCU-based mentor reported the most activity because it was easy to meet up and they often bumped into each other on campus.

Based on this experience, we decided to try a peer support model rather than a mentoring model for the second course. The peer support model is based on the action learning sets, which means that the groups meet in between course sessions and are also available to each other through e-mail and so on. With two to three people in each set, we hoped to avoid the situation where an individual is left without support. Although the composition of the groups changed slightly in the beginning because some participants were unable to attend, the groups settled down after that. Informal feedback was very positive, with participants finding excellent support from their peers. It is also interesting to note that while participants might not be able to attend a formal session, they did tend to make a point of attending their group meetings in between sessions, reflecting the value of the peer-mentoring process.

## Portfolio Development

The participants in the first course had very mixed experiences with portfolio development. This might have been because the first course assumed that participants would develop a totally electronic portfolio. Also, we did not provide any sample entries, mainly because we were trying to honour the highly personal, individual nature of portfolios.

One participant has developed a very comprehensive portfolio using the CPD framework and intends to apply for membership of the HE Academy. This participant also feels that the portfolio will play a key role in future promotion Another participant has developed a comprehensive critical incident portfolio on paper, which is being used to support doctoral study. Two other participants have indicated that they are very interested in continuing with portfolio practice but have not yet managed to make a significant start. Another feels that 'the moment has passed'; with several competing activities, most with external deadlines and drivers, this person will not continue with the process at this time. Two participants left the University during the summer and one felt the course was too unstructured to be productive. The experience of another participant who had decided not to continue with the portfolio but was prompted to change this because of a critical incident at the start of the new semester was particularly interesting (see Appendix 1).

At the start of the second course, the facilitator brought in her own portfolio, showed and explained its physical artefacts (such as pieces of assessment which had been really successful; articles of which she was particularly proud, a notebook in which she kept her own thoughts and so on) and described the various electronic, paper, personal and professional components. In addition, each participant was given a box folder, which contained a pen, a refill pad and a CD to demonstrate the various media that might be useful. The second course showed more promising results than the first. Of the participants, all developed a portfolio; all identified the critical incident or case study on which they wished to focus; all had made initial statements of their teaching philosophies; and all had met in between sessions. In addition several had acquired a small notebook in which to record their reflections. Two participants have based recent applications for promotion on their reflective portfolio and one has decided to structure an article she 'had been struggling to write' on Boyer's scholarships.

## Future challenges

Formal evaluation has not yet been conducted although this is planned for after the second course and will gather feedback on both courses. Longer term, it will be a challenge to encourage people to continue their portfolio development, especially those without extrinsic motivation such as promotion.

## Outcomes

As will be clear from the discussion above, we had some mixed feelings about the success of the first portfolio course, with some disappointment about the attendance and the progress made. But this experience probably provided a richer learning

opportunity than if the course had run with no problems. By combining structure and flexibility, gradually introducing the alternative models and approaches, and running the course during teaching time, we hope we have created opportunities for more success in the second course.

Possibly the most important outcome of the DCU portfolio experience so far is the development of a reflective network. Participants in both courses have commented on the value of having reflective peers and a network of people who are interested in reflective practice, which gives them the opportunity to discuss teaching and learning issues and so on. As a result, there is growing interest in this area across the University, with the emergence of various projects and initiatives on reflective practice and reflective learning. Participants have also commented favourably on the opportunities offered by the courses for them to meet, get to know and discuss teaching and learning with people from different disciplines. Moreover, some of the participants in the second course were not teachers, but came from areas of the University that nevertheless support reflective learning, including the DCU Careers Service and Student Life Office. These two factors suggest that the fledgling reflective network is extending beyond academics to create an institution-wide community of practice. A concrete example of this is that several of the portfolio participants have responded to a request to act as mentors to students taking the 'Uaneen Module' , a portfolio-based module available to DCU students who can earn academic credits for a range of extracurricular activities by developing and submitting a reflective learning portfolio.

Development activities will be organised to support this community, including annual or semi-annual away-days for course participants. This is likely to be particularly helpful for those participants who might otherwise lack the motivation to continue with their portfolio development.

This outcome is particularly important because it is consistent with the strategic objective of portfolio development at DCU noted at the beginning of this case study—that is, it makes a contribution to developing a culture of reflective learning at both the classroom and the institutional level.

## Plans for Future Development

DCU plans to continue with portfolio courses as long as there is a demand for them. We hope to introduce portfolios to support several other initiatives including promotion and the President's Awards for Teaching Excellence. We also hope that participants in previous courses will act as mentors to new participants and that, as portfolios develop, some individuals will use them in applications for membership of professional bodies (such as the Higher Education Academy).

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## Appendix 1: Critical Incident Portfolio Sample

The portfolio sample below was written by a participant in the first DCU portfolio course (May–June 2006). This participant had decided that she would probably not continue with the portfolio process, but she found herself using the critical incident model to resolve a difficult large-class situation.

### Critical Incident: Lecture with 2nd Year Nursing Students

I gave a one-hour lecture on the theory of reflective practice to 230 second-year undergraduate BSc Nursing students. I came away from the session frustrated and annoyed as I felt I had not gained appropriate control of the class and was dreading the additional two hours of lectures I knew I had to deliver to them two days later. I decided to liaise with a number of my lecturing colleagues for their advice on how to manage large groups and also focused on advice relating to questioning of large groups. I was amazed to find that most of my colleagues were having the same difficulties with this particular class. One colleague suggested that I should use Gibbs' reflective cycle, which I had covered in the theory session with the students to reflect on my own experience with the class. The following paragraphs detail my reflection, which I in fact shared with this same class two days after the experience.

### Gibbs Reflective Cycle (adapted to the Critical Incident Portfolio Model)

#### What happened?

*I delivered a one-hour lecture to 230 students. The class was very noisy, requiring me to stop the lecture on more than five occasions to ask the talkers to be quiet. This meant I had to shout over the noise to ensure the people who did want to listen got value from the lecture. Also I was more of a dictator than a lecturer which is not my style as I like to be interactive and upbeat when teaching. In addition, I got a very poor response to questions I directed to the large group throughout the lecture.*

#### What did I feel at the time?

*I felt disrespected by the noisy students and was very disappointed in the behaviour of the group as a whole whilst feeling sorry for the students who did want to listen and learn. I was very frustrated by the end of the hour as I had spent four hours on a bank holiday weekend preparing the lecture and I felt very few students had benefited from my efforts. Also I was frustrated when I asked questions that nobody was answering.*

#### What was I thinking at the time?

*Honestly I was thinking, 'I wish I didn't have to continually shout over the noise as I'm getting hoarse. I should move up the aisle and stand beside the students who are talking but I can't because my voice won't project well now that it's hoarse'. Also I was thinking, 'I wish I had the courage to throw out the noisy students but I'm not sure if I'm allowed to do so under the new mandatory attendance system'. This meant I was lacking in confidence in relation to making a firm decision about ejection of students. I wished I had more experience with questioning as my strategy was not working with this group.*

Evaluation: What was good/bad about the experience?

| Good | Bad |
|---|---|
| • Content covered despite style of teaching<br>• Interested students asked questions at the end<br>• Apologies offered by a number of students on behalf of the class<br>• Finished within time | • Dictator style of teaching leading to teacher-led lecture<br>• Had to shout leading to hoarseness<br>• Never fully controlled the noise element<br>• Poor response to questions therefore limited assessment of student learning |

Analysis: What sense can I make of the situation?
*I was fully aware that the monitored attendance meant certain students feel forced to attend the lectures and making noise was their way of rebelling against the system. My personal interest in the students' education meant I was reluctant to ask students to leave. In relation to questioning in a large group I understood that students feel uncomfortable asking or answering questions in front of large groups and I know reflective practice is a difficult concept for students to grasp so they became uninterested.*

Conclusion: What else could I have done?
*I could have moved around the class more to encourage noisy students to interact with the larger group. I could have created more student interaction by focusing on specific students or rows of students when asking questions. I could have worn a microphone for voice projection allowing me to move away from the podium and thus control the noise better. I could have asked students to leave and recorded them as absent. I could have used the energy of the large group in a more constructive way by introducing group work into the session.*

Action Plan
*I plan to do all of the above when I meet this group again in two days and most importantly I plan to be myself and enjoy teaching as I always have and to be more confident in actively ejecting noisy students.*

What did I do afterwards?
*I met with the class for a two-hour session, part two of the reflective lecture I had been asked to cover. I spent a few minutes revising the topic and immediately incorporated a different approach to questioning. I asked the students if they would like to hear my reflection and they were really interested. I spent 20 minutes going through my reflection and then broke the class up into a number of groups asking each group to use the same reflective cycle to reflect on an event which was to be fed back to the larger group. One group reflected on how they felt following my reflection which was excellent. I felt we bonded as a group and that I had regained the respect of the group. I did not have any problems with noise on this occasion and it was an excellent lecture. The class all stood up and clapped at the end.*