

## Chapter 11

### The Use of Student Feedback in Teaching Portfolios at the University of Limerick

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#### Context

This chapter explores how a small group of higher education teachers (nominees for the University of Limerick's teaching excellence awards) used student feedback in preparing and presenting their teaching portfolios. In particular, it examines how and the extent to which student evaluation data was used to reflect on and illustrate the nominees' effectiveness as teachers in academic environments.

#### The Functions of Teaching Portfolios

In many contexts, teaching portfolios have become widely used to facilitate decision-making about the career progression and development of academics. Such decisions include the selection of recipients for teaching excellence awards, evaluation of faculty for promotion, and granting of tenure and reappointment (Calegari, Geisler & Larkins 1999). The benefits of portfolio preparation go beyond a summative, reward-related evaluation of faculty teaching, however. In fact, it can be argued that portfolios are best used as a structured methodology for stimulating and developing reflective practice, and that this opportunity for reflection often leads to improved teaching (Calegari, Geisler & Larkins 1999; Danielson & McGreal 2000). The literature contains considerable guidance on what teaching portfolios should contain and how they should be presented (see, for example, Lyons 1998; Edgerton, Hutchings and Quinlan 1991; Shore 1986). Writers on these topics tend to recommend the inclusion of such elements as:

- a broad description of teaching responsibilities
- a statement of teaching philosophy
- evidence of teaching effectiveness
- proof of ongoing strategies undertaken to enhance or to improve teaching (Babin, Shaffer & Tomas 2002).

#### The Role of Student Feedback in Teaching Portfolios

Babin, Shaffer and Tomas (2002) and other commentators in this field (Calegari, Geisler & Larkins 1999) also recommend that student feedback be included in the teaching effectiveness section of a portfolio, in spite of the controversy over the use of student feedback systems to assess or evaluate teaching quality (see, for example, Moore & Kuol 2005). Generally, it seems clear that student feedback is an important source of information. What tends to be less clear, however, is how student feedback

typically is (or should be) used, invoked and interpreted in the context of a teaching portfolio (Centra 1994), particularly in relation to its subsequent ability to facilitate effective teaching.

This chapter engages in an exploration of the reflective strategies used by a small group of academic faculty at the University of Limerick (UL) as evidenced by their portfolio-based references to and reflections on student feedback. The tentative results are used to suggest briefly some more structured and challenging ways in which student feedback might be meaningfully interpreted as part of a portfolio preparation process.

### Objectives of Portfolio Development

As the literature suggests, teaching portfolios are used mainly for two purposes: faculty evaluation (summative) and teaching improvement resulting from individual reflection on teaching (formative). The widespread use of teaching portfolios is often associated with evaluative motives (Edgerton, Hutchings & Quinlan 1991). On the other hand, Seldin and Associates (1993), Anderson (1993), and Babin, Shaffer and Tomas (2002) argue that the process of developing a teaching portfolio is more beneficial to teachers than the resulting portfolio itself, and that simply engaging in the portfolio development process provides insights into teaching, which in turn may lead to teaching improvement.

Therefore, a teaching portfolio can be defined not only as a factual summary of a teacher's major strengths, abilities and teaching accomplishments (Seldin 1991; Edgerton, Hutchings & Quinlan 1991); it is also recognised as a key mechanism for reflection on teaching.

### Portfolios for Reflection and Improvement

Teaching portfolios have often been used and are frequently presented as reflective tools that allow teachers to become more self-aware, understand the reasons for observed phenomena in their teaching and develop a stronger sense of professional insight and identity as teachers (see, for example, Wolf, Whinery & Hagerty 1995). This is consistent with Schön's (1983) idea of 'reflective practitioners'—people who think while they are doing, who 'reflect in action', who become researchers of their own practice and who are then better equipped with knowledge about their impact on the learning, engagement and performance of their students.

Preparation of a teaching portfolio can lead to demonstrated improvements in teaching effectiveness. Seldin (in Calegari, Geigler & Larkins 1999) argues that faculty who have engaged in a process of teaching portfolio preparation, compared to those who have never done so, are more likely to discuss their teaching with colleagues, more willing to experiment with new teaching strategies and more engaged in the development of enhanced teaching materials. They are also more likely to have developed an ability to reflect on and analyse their own teaching effectiveness.

There is, however, very little structured research on or analysis of the extent to which (and in what ways) teachers use student feedback as part of the portfolio preparation process. Our analysis focuses on a small group of teachers to shed some further light on this issue. More specifically, we explore how nominees for a teaching excellence award reflected on student feedback during the process of portfolio preparation.

### Background to the Teaching Excellence Award at UL

Since 2001, UL's excellence in teaching award has been portfolio based. Nominees are short-listed according to student feedback ratings (a useful but inevitably imperfect methodology, which is subject to the traditional strengths and weaknesses of student evaluations of teaching). Once short-listed, candidates are required to produce a teaching portfolio that incorporates a range of information.

### Constructing a Portfolio for the UL Teaching Excellence Award

The UL portfolio can include (but is not necessarily restricted to) the following:

- a statement of the individual's teaching philosophy and personal orientations to teaching
- evidence of teaching performance and effectiveness, teaching quality, teacher–class relationship; evidence of planning and preparation
- examples of assessment methodologies used and evidence that relates to their impact on student learning
- incidences of innovative approaches to teaching
- participation in professional development workshops and ongoing professional development in teaching and learning
- research in teaching and learning within or beyond an individual's own academic discipline.

Such requirements are consistent with the perspectives of O'Neill and Wright (1993) and Seldin (1991, 1993, 1997). All recommend that a structured model should be available when faculty are developing a portfolio. Furthermore, portfolios intended for summative purposes (for example, teaching excellence awards) should follow certain guidelines in order to enhance comparability. Although existing literature is not always clear about whether a teaching portfolio should contain both teaching failures and successes, much of the scholarly discussion implies that, for summative purposes, a portfolio should present the best teaching achievements (Edgerton, Hutchings & Quinlan 1991; Seldin 1991, 1993). In any case, the literature also highlights the importance of including a reflective commentary that explains the rationale for the information in the teaching portfolio. This is worthwhile and consistent with the aims associated with portfolio preparation (Edgerton, Hutchings & Quinlan 1991).

### Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs)

The use of student evaluations of teaching effectiveness (SETs) has been largely motivated by an increasing emphasis on monitoring the quality of teaching in higher education. Reasons for collecting SETs include:

- providing formative or diagnostic feedback to teachers that will be useful for teaching improvement
- providing information for personnel and administrative decision-making purposes
- enhancing communication and interaction with students, especially in large-class settings where informal channels may be more difficult to establish or interpret
- conducting research on teaching effectiveness.

Some of the literature cautions against the assumption that student feedback can provide data that necessarily measures or indicates teaching excellence. Although a full critique of SET systems is beyond the scope of this case study, we can say that SETs are often referred to as systems that satisfy only relatively shallow bureaucratic needs. Some feel that they are, or can be, merely popularity contests, which have unintended and negative outcomes such as grade inflation and a lowering of standards (see, for example, Tomasco 1980; Green, Calderon & Reider 1998; Carey 1993; Calderon, Gabbin & Green, 1996).

On the other hand, there is also a body of literature that endorses and encourages the use of SETs (see, for example, Stockham & Amann 1994 and Hand & Rowe, 2001). As the immediate beneficiaries of teaching, students are in a position to report or comment on:

- the teaching strategies that best facilitate their learning
- teachers' preparedness for class
- teachers' approachability during and outside class hours
- usefulness of feedback provided on essays
- the impact of teaching on their level of interest in the subject matter.

## Outcomes

### Evidence of SETs in UL Portfolios

We engaged in a qualitative analysis of teaching portfolios, which involved a detailed scanning of the texts of twelve separate portfolios and the identification of references to UL's formal SET system. Although a detailed display of the research is beyond the scope of this case study, we can report that our analysis enabled the identification of six key 'categories of reflection', which seem to have been prompted by a reflection by participants on the data their students provided via the formal SET system.

These categories are:

- using qualitative student comments as evidence of effective teaching (92 per cent)
- focusing on students' responses to specific teaching interventions (64 per cent)
- invoking evidence of teacher-class relationship (64 per cent)
- invoking student feedback as a trigger for continuous improvement (50 per cent)
- using quantitative student ratings as evidence of effective teaching (18 per cent)

- using negative aspects of feedback to address problems with teaching (18 per cent).

Essentially, our analysis shows that in practice, the members of this exploratory group used only a relatively small range of reflective categories. As seen above, the most frequently invoked aspect of student feedback appearing in the portfolios is students' qualitative opinions, expressed in their own words and reproduced by teachers in their portfolios. The categories we identified also reveal a focus among participating teachers on how particular teaching innovations 'worked' from the perspectives of their students. There are also relatively frequent references to how student feedback nourishes and sustains continuous improvement. Less frequently appearing categories focus on the use of quantitative scores and the use of negative student feedback to enhance performance.

### How UL Teachers Use SETs in their Portfolios

Edgerton, Hutchings & Quinlan (1991) maintain that teaching portfolios developed for evaluative purposes (for example, teaching excellence awards) are more likely than reflective portfolios to have a standard structure. In practice, however, there are significant and complex differences in the ways that teachers prepare their portfolios.

In this small study, we observed that even though these portfolios were submitted for the same purpose, the ways that information from SETs is used, presented, invoked and interpreted varies significantly from one submission to another. Some teachers refer to SETs in general terms, whereas others use them to verify or confirm specific aspects of teaching effectiveness, approaches, methods, materials and student assessments. In addition, teachers seem to differ in deciding whether to present only their best teaching achievements or to include the 'failures' or 'deficiencies' that may have been highlighted through the SET system. In this study, a minority of teachers view SETs as diagnostic tools that highlight less effective areas of teaching and learning. And only where this is highlighted are intended teaching-related changes discussed.

All of the participants in this study had already been selected as excellent teachers, but all had also received student feedback that highlighted teaching weaknesses as well as strengths. Only some, however, chose to focus on negative aspects for the purposes of reflection and discussion. In addition, participants seemed to be more comfortable invoking qualitative data (that is, student comments) than quantitative ratings, which are less frequently referred to by participants even when those ratings are not just above average, but very high. The real words and perspectives of students seem to carry more weight for participants and are more likely to be integrated into their accounts, interpretations and self-evaluations of their teaching.

### Challenges of Using Sets in Teaching Portfolios

In summary, even this small and somewhat restricted study shows that portfolio preparation does provide an opportunity for teachers to reflect in some broad and meaningful ways on students' evaluations of their teaching. The analysis also shows

however, that participants were most likely to use student feedback primarily to attest to the effectiveness of particular teaching approaches; they were somewhat less likely (although not completely unlikely) to view the feedback as a diagnostic tool for highlighting less effective areas of teaching or as a guide for attempts to engage in teaching-related improvements. These findings are further testimony to the teaching portfolio literature, which maintains that teachers do engage in self-reflection and that they also actively interpret information provided by others for the purposes of portfolio preparation. Our study tentatively suggests, however, that they may need more encouragement and guidance in adopting a diagnostic or improvement-orientated approach to their teaching.

### Conclusions and Ideas for Future Portfolio Development

Self-reflection is central to the process of teaching improvement. Calegari, Geisler and Larkins (1999) note the utility of teacher reflection on teaching approaches, strategies and goals and how these have been successful during the process of constructing a teaching portfolio. Thus, reflection on teaching strategy and on student and peer feedback is an essential part of any meaningful teaching portfolio. Through reflection and comparison of self-reports and reports from other sources personal growth, professional development and performance improvements can be achieved.

As we have discussed above, the experts in teaching portfolio research favour student evaluation information as one of the valuable sources for self-reflection. They are, however, less clear about how this information should be used. The key message from this small exploratory study is that student feedback can be used and reflected upon in various ways, not all of which may be immediately obvious to teachers involved in preparing their teaching portfolios. Because of this, we recommend that any institutional guidance on teaching portfolio preparation should not simply guide faculty to look for student feedback as part of that process. We argue that guidance needs to go further than this and provide a framework of reflective categories for higher education teachers to consider in advance of portfolio preparation and compilation. Furthermore, portfolio guidance would do well to clarify the extent to which learning from negative student perspectives can represent one of the most useful routes to a genuinely reflective and professionally developing agenda for individual teachers. Indeed, award systems might be enhanced by valuing such an approach.

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