

## What Next for Teaching Portfolios in Ireland?

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### Introduction

Ireland has seen significant changes to the third-level teaching and learning landscape in recent years—and there is more change to come. There has been steady expansion of student numbers at both third and fourth levels, with growth expected to increase further in the future. This has been coupled with agendas to widen participation and create an inclusive and accessible higher education system. There is a growing national focus on lifelong learning, including accrediting learning in settings outside the classroom and the campus, as well as acknowledging and crediting students' prior learning and knowledge. The higher education sector is becoming more diverse, both in terms of the students who study, the staff who teach and support student learning, and the curricula that are developed and offered. In parallel with these changes, it has been acknowledged that the professional development of staff is a vital component of any strategy designed to enable institutions across the sector to respond positively and proactively to change.

It is clear from the case studies in this book that portfolios are becoming increasingly widespread as one strategy in a suite of approaches to support the professional development of academics and teachers in higher education. There are many reasons for this. Portfolios enable systematic reflection on and questioning of teachers' practice. Teaching portfolios and portfolio courses can be usefully framed as vehicles for scholarly inquiry, as a means of support and structure for academic exploration and experimentation, and as a way to record and evidence changes in teacher understanding and actions. The creation of a teaching portfolio can be introduced to academic staff for continuing professional development, as part of a structured programme of learning or as a mechanism to evidence practice for institutional reward criteria. The case studies presented here all report on the positive impacts of portfolio development for academic staff, but there is still more systematic inquiry and research to be undertaken.

In particular, this research might focus on whether the learning insights gained by staff through the development of a portfolio lead to sustained and meaningful changes to their behaviour and actions, and whether these in turn positively impact on the student learning experience. Finding the answers to these questions will be no easy task. The interrelationship between teacher activity and learner achievement is complex, but as educational developers we need to be mindful that the relationship between teaching and learning is at the heart of our work, and that this should guide educational development work that centres on the development of teaching portfolios.

In this final chapter, we consider two questions:

- What is it about teaching portfolios and portfolio programmes that can create such a powerful experience for learning and development?
- What opportunities present themselves for the further development and use of portfolios by individuals and organisations?

### Portfolios as Powerful Learning Tools

When teaching portfolios work well, they can lead to the transformation of beliefs and conceptions, to new learning and insights, and also to changes in practice. Such outcomes are most often seen when portfolios combine critical reflection, pedagogic inquiry and reflective writing, particularly in a peer-supported and collaborative learning environment (such as a portfolio programme). Individually, critical reflection, pedagogic inquiry and reflective writing can be novel and challenging activities for academics. Together, they represent a new suite of modes for working and learning, which requires sensitive support and guidance to create an atmosphere of trust and respectful collaboration among those new to portfolios.

### Critical Reflection

Fundamental to the process of constructing a developmental portfolio—and a feature of the case studies in this volume—is the process of standing back from an experience of practice, and examining and analysing it critically with a view to better understanding what worked, why and how. Academics are not necessarily accustomed to or comfortable with holding their own work up to scrutiny and analysis. Nevertheless, this process can be aided by the use of prompt questions and models, such as those suggested by Kreber and Cranton (2000), which build on the distinctions between *content*, *process* and *premise reflection* proposed by Mezirow (1991).

*Content reflection* focuses on what is assumed or believed to be true. This is a useful place to start the reflective process, because it allows the articulation of assumptions and beliefs. On the other hand, it can be criticised as lacking validity if it perpetuates an inward-looking reflective process without recourse to a wider base of evidence and knowledge. *Process reflection*—which examines the effectiveness of practice—and *premise reflection*—which considers the underlying suppositions of practice—both address this issue by situating reflection on practice in relation to other evidence. Both approaches require such evidence to be examined and compared to other sources of knowledge. On teaching portfolio programmes, this comparison often takes the form of peers, facilitators and mentors talking and sharing views, perspectives and evidence bases.

In the introductory chapter, O'Farrell suggests that this process of sharing can underpin the development of a 'teaching commons' and describes how reflection can benefit from shared analysis. Subsequently, however, Hanratty and O'Farrell warn that this practice may be sabotaged if the assumptions and beliefs under discussion are not subject to deeper and more thoughtful analysis. Kuol and Moore

have discussed how important it is to include student voices in the evidence base for reflection on practice. Indeed, student voices are critical if reflection on teaching practices is to be meaningfully linked to student learning and learner outcomes.

I would also argue that without engagement with the scholarly literature, either theoretical or practice based, it is difficult to develop critical reflectivity and to ask meaningful questions about teaching. Indeed, if the development of teaching portfolios does not include an emphasis on the fundamental relationship between critical reflection and scholarly literature, the risk is that academics will not recognise the scholarly and inquiry-based nature of learning and teaching development. In turn, this could perpetuate the long-standing elevation of research over teaching that has characterised the academic experience for many staff.

The implications of this would be significant. It would not only impoverish potential outcomes of portfolio development in relation to personal growth, understanding and practice. In the longer term, it could sustain a false belief that personal teaching practice and the wider published literature base are not interconnected. Clearly this is not the case. Internationally, the number of higher education teaching and learning journals and conferences has expanded enormously in recent years. This has been fuelled in part by the increasing funding available for teaching and learning and the concomitant expectation of research into, and dissemination of investigations of, the relationship between teaching practice and student learning. Indeed, at the time of writing, AISHE, the All Ireland Society for Higher Education, is announcing the development of a new e-journal for the dissemination of practices within the sector.

As higher education adjusts to a climate of continuous change, it has never been more important that practising lecturers are equipped to reflect critically on and interrogate their own practice, to engage with the experience and views of others, local peers as well as national and international colleagues, and to participate in the discourse on teaching and learning. Thus equipped, academic educators are well placed to become scholars of their own teaching and their students' learning.

### Pedagogic Inquiry

The scholarly practices of most academic staff—that is, the way they ask and answer research questions—are framed by their disciplinary backgrounds. Although disciplinary knowledge bases and practices are constantly changing, they nevertheless provide structures and norms. These are enforced by the disciplinary community, through peer review and publication processes. Publications act as time-bound snapshots of current practice priorities and approaches, as well as reflecting to the wider world how knowledge is constructed, valued and shared by practitioners in the discipline. Learning and teaching in higher education is an emerging discipline, which draws on the discourses and practices of the many disciplines from which its scholars come. Although multidisciplinary, the learning and teaching practitioner's discourse is, as we have seen, often characterised by critical reflection, which requires the examination and analysis of multiple forms of evidence that are then considered together to enable practice-based change. Here I

discuss how this evidence might be collected, what forms it might take and how it might contribute to and enrich the evidence base for teaching and learning in higher education.

Throughout the case studies, I see a focus on collegial sharing and debate as a mechanism for bringing ideas into a wider forum, which is highlighted as an important component of the process of teaching portfolio development. Among the case studies, some authors argue for an inquiry-based approach to teaching portfolios for personal development as well as for more formal assessment (see Lyons, Halton & Lyons). Others consider that engaging in practitioner-based research into one's own practice can bring teaching and research together through the process of pedagogic inquiry (Hyland, Higgs & McCarthy; Kuol & Moore.) Although the reflections and evidence presented in this volume testify that it is personally enriching to reflect *a posteriori* on evidence collected before compiling a teaching portfolio, there is also an argument to be made for the collection of evidence and the interrogation of practice through experimentation as itself a fundamental component of developing a teaching portfolio. These two approaches, reflection-on-practice and reflection-in-practice, have been discussed by other authors in this volume and resonate with a common research distinction between inductive and deductive inquiry. Explicitly comparing these two binary models and relating them to disciplinary research paradigms may be a useful way of engaging academic staff from diverse disciplinary backgrounds with pedagogic practitioner inquiry and reflection.

There is a developing theoretical literature on how pedagogic inquiry situated within disciplines and responding to disciplinary perspectives and needs might be a fruitful approach to bridging the gap between research and teaching and between discipline-based academics and the scholarship of teaching and learning (see, for example, Healey & Jenkins 2006). Taylor Huber (2006) argues that the scholarship of teaching and learning might be enriched by disciplinary perspectives and methods as academics bring to it their own 'intellectual capital, habits of mind, and modes of collaboration that they have developed as professional scholars in their fields' (p. 73). Certainly it is my view that this is a rich area for further exploration and inquiry in its own right within the context of developing teaching portfolios. For example, we might start by considering how our portfolio structures and programmes constrain or encourage the links between participants' inquiry into their teaching practices and the research practices of their home disciplines.

### Reflective Writing

For many academics, writing is a challenging process. This is particularly the case for academics at the beginning of their careers, who have a variety of concerns about academic writing within their disciplines and who may find it difficult to integrate writing into their academic role (see, for example, McGrail, Rickard & Jones 2006). A lack of confidence in writing skills may be exacerbated both by a lack of time to write and the pressure to write for publication, which is inextricably linked to academic career progression, professional standing and research identity.

Reflective writing may present some of the difficulties academics experience with scholarly writing in the disciplines, as well as posing fresh challenges for those who have no prior experience of writing as a medium for learning—of writing to learn. The first challenge faced by many academics when they come to reflective writing is that they often have little prior experience of the craft of writing; they have not necessarily learned to write in their disciplines. Rather, academic writing is often perceived as something that is simply ‘picked up’. If learned in any explicit way, it is usually through practice of the discipline rather than the consideration of underpinning skills.

Second, writing for a portfolio can be new and unfamiliar for many academics, quite different from the controlled authorship of more traditional academic written work. Academics may well be experienced and able in writing articles and books, course documents, student learning materials, papers for committees and so on, but these texts all have purposes and audiences outside the self. It can be uncomfortable for many to situate themselves as the ‘voiced author’ at the centre of their writing, which is itself focused on their views, their experiences, their affective responses and professional behaviours. Writing as an action that stimulates and encourages reflection on one’s own practice (as well as recording the reflective process) can be an unsettling experience. This can occur, for example, when learning is ‘slowed down’ through the process of reflective writing, and the emotional content and emotional insights of the learning process are made explicit (Moon 2004.) Although participants on portfolio courses may share their writing with others—such as course participants, assessors and, in some cases, reviewers—the primary, sometimes sole and often most critical audience of the final written portfolio entry is the self. This is because the final written entry stands as a marker of the process of critical reflection and inquiry, as well as the personal development journey and growth of the author.

Therefore, when supporting academic staff with the development of teaching portfolios in the future, we may well need to focus on how we can best support them in reflective writing. In doing so, we will necessarily support participants as they ‘write to learn’ and ‘learn to write’, which few would argue are two crucial skills for both teachers and students in higher education.

### The Future of Portfolios

Whereas some portfolios may be prepared for personal and professional development purposes, there are examples in this collection of the presentation of portfolio entries and teaching philosophy statements as part of a portfolio for assessment or for review for promotion and/or reward (for example, see chapters by Donnelly & Fitzmaurice; Murphy & MacLaren; Halton & Lyons). In this section of the chapter, I explore these issues: the diverse uses, audiences and multipurposing of portfolios, as well as the potential for technology to enhance the learning experience from portfolio development.

## Portfolio Uses and Audiences

The diverse case studies in this volume demonstrate that there is no single approach either to the content or the structure of a teaching portfolio. In its most basic form, a portfolio can be construed as a collection of artefacts or work outcomes. For example, a teaching portfolio for promotion may comprise collated evidence, indexed or mapped against criteria, to enable a judgement of the quality and/or breadth of work. This may evidence professional practice but it does not necessarily enable the reader or assessor to identify whether learning has taken place. In contrast, a portfolio that demonstrates learning and personal development is likely to comprise written artefacts *about* evidence. These document lessons learned and changes to practice as a result of reflection, but may not necessarily include either the evidence used for reflection or evidence to substantiate claims of change. Somewhere in between is a range of other, hybrid portfolio models that enable and record professional teaching development. Several authors have attempted to describe the range and diversity of portfolio practices within higher education (see, for example, Baume 2003) but few have confidently put forward a comprehensive model. Most proposals usually focus on the purpose of the portfolio, although Baume (2003, p. 14) suggests a model that defines portfolio differences by structure, for example by time, by individual pieces of work, by topic or theme, or by learning outcome or assessment criteria.

What distinguishes the forms of teaching portfolios are their contexts and reader audiences—for example, institutional promotion committees, accrediting professional bodies, teaching and learning programme leaders. Like academic disciplines, these audiences set their own norms and paradigms to which their portfolio expectations are aligned. But a portfolio that fulfils the requirements of one context may render itself insufficient for another context or purpose. The other significant factor that determines the form of a teaching portfolio is the individuals' own expectations and aspirations. Indeed, one might expect and anticipate that each individual may wish to draw on and/or contribute to his or her teaching portfolio at different times in their professional development for different purposes. After all, professional development is complex, personal and experienced in many different ways (Akerlind 2006). As educational developers, we need to consider how we can best support academic staff to balance the different demands that will be placed on them as critically reflective writers and pedagogic scholars.

One important step we can take is to make clear our expectations and requirements of participants on the teaching portfolio programmes that we develop and design. This is particularly important when our programmes include an assessment component, in which case we need to be explicit about learning outcomes and assessment criteria. Where possible, however, we could also encourage participants to develop their own outcomes and criteria to maximise the use of the portfolio to meet personal learning goals. Outcomes and criteria could be developed by individuals or, perhaps, even more powerfully, by groups, such that the learning potential of collaborative reflection and inquiry could be harnessed. The explicit expectation to work creatively and collaboratively with colleagues might, as Moon (2004) suggests, provide motivation and ideas, and direct individual learning into new areas. It might also lend personal reflective inquiry more clarity and diversity of

purpose, and better support the potential of individual reflective inquiry to be more aligned to local (departmental, school) or institutional aspirations.

### Technology and Portfolios

Perhaps what is most striking in the collection of case studies presented in this volume is the absence of examples of and references to the use of technology to support the development of teaching portfolios. Only the UCD case study by Geraldine O'Neill notes any formal use of technology. In this instance, participants are asked to share and respond to their colleagues' critical reflections online. There are several areas where judicious use and embedding of technology within teaching portfolio programmes could bring benefits.

The use of virtual spaces to create, structure and design portfolios is an obvious starting point with a range of international experiences and projects from which lessons could be drawn (for example, in the UK, the e-portfolio projects funded by JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) and in the USA, the Portfolio Clearinghouse website). Virtual spaces could offer personal areas to collate evidence, reflective writing and to explore and develop ideas. They could be developed as a repository for materials, including teaching evidence, written artefacts and reflections on teaching practices. Perhaps most powerfully for learning, the online environment might also be explored as a shared space for online discussion, collaborative writing and review and as a shared repository.

These developments could offer benefits at the local level for participants and colleagues creating teaching portfolios as part of a specific portfolio programme. At this level, within institutions or within teaching portfolio programmes, the online environment might help individuals to maintain contact outside structured hours, to discuss and to develop individual or collaborative inquiry. Contact with others might be extended within programmes and institutions to a wider community—for example, by connecting past and current participants on the same programmes within institutions (thus enriching the mentoring schemes that are a part of so many of the programmes described in this volume). Online spaces such as these might be even more powerful, however, if they brought together, in a virtual teaching commons, individuals from the wider community of academics and teachers to reflect on, explore and inquire into their teaching practices in diverse settings.

I see the most value in a virtual teaching commons where it connects without boundaries, enabling individuals and participants across portfolio programmes in diverse institutions to make contact and to establish and develop their own communities. There is, after all, an increasing number of academic practitioners in Ireland who are engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning through reflection, inquiry and writing. Of course, this is an exciting idea to visualise but perhaps more challenging to develop in reality. Nevertheless, this volume stands as testimony to the willingness of educational developers across Ireland to come together to share their practices, to learn from and with each other—both in supporting the professional development of their colleagues and in enhancing the learning opportunities and experiences of students in higher education.

Although it may be a small conceptual step for educational developers to bring together our academic educator colleagues to learn together from across our institutions, it would indeed represent a big step in many other ways for our learners, for our institutions and for us to create a national teaching commons. There would be many practical details to be considered. But the foundations for success in such a project are already in place. There exists a spirit of respectful collaboration among those who design and develop teaching portfolio programmes; there are national funding mechanisms and expectations for institutes of higher education to collaborate to enhance teaching and learning; and there are the testimonies from individual educators on the value of and benefits to their personal beliefs and practices from engaging in reflective inquiry into their teaching practices with their colleagues.

### Conclusions

In this chapter, I have explored some of the recurrent features of teaching portfolios and participation in teaching portfolio programmes that have emerged from the case studies presented in this volume. I have considered how they contribute to the professional development of teachers in third-level education and considered what might be the next steps in the future development and use of portfolios for professional development within and across institutions. Developments to support academic staff learning and professional development through the use of portfolios have been widespread across the national higher education sector, and the case studies here provide a rich demonstration of the benefits accrued through collaborative inquiry and critical reflection into teaching practices. These developments have opened up new prospects for future approaches and raised questions for further inquiry and debate to support the professional development of teachers in higher education. It has never been more important in Irish higher education to explore these next steps. As a committed and collegial community of educational developers, we must surely develop and move forward with a shared vision for exemplary, collaborative practice based on respect for the needs and aspirations of the individual learners, educators and institutions we serve.

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