



centre for the study of higher education

Preparing a Teaching Portfolio *Advice On Recording And Describing Teaching Activities And Achievements*

By Richard James

Academic staff of the University are strongly advised to develop a portfolio that describes their teaching experience, achievements and effectiveness. While the documentation of a research career is a relatively straightforward exercise, many academics are less sure about how to describe their teaching history and how to present evidence of their effectiveness as a teacher. One reason is that research achievements can be listed by following simple conventions, but this is less true of teaching. Capturing a teaching career in a succinct summary for the purposes of a curriculum vitae is challenging.

This booklet is a collection of ideas to assist staff to document information on the scope and effectiveness of their teaching activities. The advice has no official status in terms of the University of Melbourne's policies for appointments, promotion and assessment of academic staff. Staff should consult the appropriate policies for specific information on the University's requirements and expectations.

The advice is presented in four sections.

1. Purposes.
2. Record-keeping: Compiling a portfolio of activities and achievements.
3. Using information from evaluation of teaching.
4. Summarising and presenting information.

1. Purposes

The importance of research, winning grants, and publishing to your academic career is well known. Your qualities and capacity as a teacher also figure highly in opportunities for career advancement.



centre for the study of higher education

The purposes for which your teaching activities must be described include position applications, annual performance reviews and promotion. The way in which a teaching career is presented probably differs for each, nevertheless some standard principles apply.

Thinking particularly of promotion opportunities, it is clearly in the interests of academic staff carefully to document their teaching activities and achievements. A booklet, *Guidelines on criteria for promotion*, is published each year to assist staff who are considering applying for promotion. It is available on the web at <http://www.unimelb.edu.au/ppp/docs/hrm/Promotions.Kit.html>. Staff should refer to this booklet for current policy and procedures, since the following information is for illustrative purposes and is not intended to be comprehensive.

The University has three key criteria on which applicants for promotion are judged:

- contribution to teaching;
- advancement of the discipline; and
- service to the University,

as well as two additional criteria:

- qualifications and experience; and
- service to the discipline.

To illustrate how these criteria are applied, promotion to Level C requires:

1. a 'satisfactory level of performance' in each of the three key criteria; and
2. that '*excellence has been achieved and maintained*' in one of the three criteria.

Similarly, promotion to Level D requires:

1. a 'satisfactory level of performance' in each of the three key criteria; and
2. that '*exceptional distinction has been achieved and maintained*' in at least one of the three criteria.

Opportunities for promotion therefore depend in part on the quality of an individual's teaching career and whether or not this career has been accurately and convincingly presented and defended in a promotion application. The guidelines for promotion specify that:



centre for the study of higher education

- ‘Contribution to teaching must be thoroughly documented and its quality and effectiveness demonstrated’; and
- ‘Teaching effectiveness should be demonstrated across a number of teaching activities and various criteria are required to assess it...’.

2. Record-keeping: Compiling a portfolio of activities and achievements

The first step in preparing a teaching portfolio is to keep systematic records of all aspects of your teaching. Continual record-keeping is wise, not only as a personal *aide-mémoire*, but also as a source of evidence should it be needed. If records aren’t kept it may be difficult to recall details of teaching as the years go by, particularly since activities under the rubric of university teaching can be diverse in scope, nature and intensity. Furthermore, evidence of your claims may be called for at some stage.

Some people keep a box in their office in which they store documents relating to their teaching. Another idea is regularly to update a word-processing file with a list of teaching activities and involvements, in much the same way as many academics have developed the habit of logging information on their research grants, projects, publications and invited addresses as these come along.

What kind of information should be stored? Keep in mind that your ‘contribution to teaching’ extends well beyond your in-class performance. The information collected might include:

- Descriptive information on numbers of subjects and students taught, undergraduates and postgraduates. The number of research students supervised and the number of successful completions.
- Information on the general style and format of your teaching.
- Approaches to assessment — assessment techniques, the provision of feedback to students.
- Teaching materials developed — handbooks, notes, textbooks, computer-based resources.
- Involvement in the development of new courses, revision of old courses, the introduction of new topics.
- Innovations in teaching and learning which you have initiated or with which you have been associated.



centre for the study of higher education

- How you encourage student participation, and how you make yourself available to students.
- Papers on educational issues presented at conferences
- Membership of educational associations
- Influences on the departmental context: how you have helped address learning problems; the assistance you have provided to colleagues.
- Invitations to talk on teaching and learning issues.
- Student outcomes and achievements.
- The findings from evaluation of teaching and the action taken on them.

This information will be largely descriptive of course. The way in which it is later collated, organised and presented is critical to arguing the merit of your work.

The relationships between teaching, research and administration in higher education are complex and the dividing lines between these activities are not always clear-cut. Course administration, for instance, might involve educational decisions with a direct and substantial influence on student learning. Wherever this is the case it is quite appropriate to record such activities in your teaching portfolio.

Postgraduate education is particularly close to the nexus of teaching and research, so research supervision and postgraduate coursework deserve special attention in this context. In both, research will usually closely inform teaching. In certain disciplines, teaching might also be expected to make a contribution to a staff member's research program through the insights and perspectives brought to the classroom by postgraduate students in high-level professional employment.

3. Using information from evaluation of teaching

There is so much evaluation of teaching taking place these days that evaluative data now have special significance in a teaching portfolio. Clearly some reference to evaluation findings should be made in a curriculum vitae.

A number of approaches to evaluation of teaching are used in the University of Melbourne. There are two main categories of evaluation. In the first category are the techniques that you as an individual can design and implement yourself — this may be informal mid-subject student questionnaires, focus group interviews, and so on. The second category is



centre for the study of higher education

comprised of the evaluative techniques that are a requirement of departmental, faculty or institutional policy — such as the end-of-subject quality of teaching survey. You may have less direct influence over the design and implementation of this kind of evaluation, nevertheless the information from it pertains directly to your teaching career. Many departments conduct their own subject evaluations in addition to the University's Quality of Teaching Student Feedback Questionnaire. Usually these are written evaluations which take place towards the end of teaching in each subject, perhaps during the final lecture.

Advice on conducting evaluation can be found in the handbook *Improving teaching and courses: A guide to evaluation* (1989) by Paul Ramsden and Agnes Dodds, freely available from the Centre for the Study of Higher Education.

Perhaps the best personal approach to evaluation is to draw on a number of evaluative techniques. These might include peer review by colleagues or staff of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, outside expertise from industry/professional groups, or group techniques or interviews to collect student opinion. Staff can also use these simple evaluation techniques: inviting a colleague to visit a class to observe something in particular; asking the class to answer a few questions and write comments on a small sheet of paper a few minutes the close of a session; chatting informally with a handful of students after a session.

Student questionnaires are probably the most common evaluative technique. They are not always used well, however, and care should be exercised. Ramsden and Dodds (1989) make the following points:

- don't use them unless you intend to act on the results;
- use questionnaire items relevant to the concerns of students and yourself;
- use items likely to provide valid information;
- open-ended questions often provide the most revealing information;
- administer at the right time in the course;
- remember that responses are affected by the context;
- interpret the information from 'rating-scale' questions carefully;
- consider results professionally and do not be dismissive of criticisms;
- 'triangulate' with information from other sources; and
- inform students of changes which were prompted by their responses.



centre for the study of higher education

How should evaluative findings be presented in a teaching portfolio? There is no simple answer to this question and a good deal of personal judgement and discretion must be exercised. Most staff find they have accrued considerable material from evaluation over the years, especially student evaluation. The key is to be very selective. Some aggregate assessment of your performance on certain indicators might be possible and advantageous, but there seems little point in a litany of student ratings. The shallowest claim is that ‘the students enjoy my teaching’ or ‘the students really appreciated this approach’.

Perhaps a sensible strategy is to write a balanced summary of the information gathered from evaluation, incorporating selected findings (possibly including representative student comments) to illustrate and support your assertions. What is important is your commentary on the actions you have taken on the basis of evaluation findings. Aim to chart improvements and modifications that have been informed by careful evaluation.

Indicating an understanding of the principles of formative educational evaluation is probably a good idea, as is demonstrating that you have use a number of approaches to evaluation. Both of these are signs of a thoughtful, professional tertiary teacher.

4. Summarising and presenting information

The information you have collected on the range and quality of your teaching activities probably will need summarising for inclusion in a curriculum vitae. As noted earlier, there are no conventions for presenting teaching achievement as there are for presenting academic research and publications. It might be worthwhile seeking advice from a colleague on suitable formats for presentation. At the end of this booklet there is a checklist that also might help.

It is not possible to report all aspects of a teaching career without producing an overly long and probably inaccessible document. While a teaching portfolio is a complete record of your teaching career, the version that ends up in your CV will probably be condensed, as appropriate, for the circumstances for which it is required.

So the first principle is: be ruthlessly selective.

The second principle is to construct your summary in the form of a cogent argument that conveys your personal philosophy towards effective teaching in higher education; that is,



centre for the study of higher education

you should spell out your understanding of the teaching and learning process and of your role and responsibilities within it. Such a statement will provide a framework to help a reader make sense of the approaches to teaching you've adopted and the adjustments you've made during your career. The simple point is this: the strongest teaching portfolios do more than describe duties and actions, they convey something of the author's intentions and beliefs. Key issues are: How will you describe your philosophy towards teaching? How will you describe the relationship between your teaching and student learning? What will be the organising principle for your argument? What evidence can you provide to support this argument?

The third principle is to highlight your major achievements. These achievements are not necessarily single 'actions' or 'episodes', but may be enduring themes on which you have concentrated, such as innovative approaches to assessment, the establishment of the conditions for collaborative approaches to learning, or the provision of first-class learning resources for self-paced and small group study. The teaching portfolio is an opportunity to bring to the forefront the initiatives that you consider are your major accomplishments and which illustrate your philosophy towards teaching in universities and your understanding of the conditions for effective student learning. Supporting evidence must be extracted and presented accordingly.

Effective undergraduate and postgraduate teaching and learning in the University of Melbourne: A code of good practice, prepared in 1993 and available from the CSHE, might help identify areas that can be reported and provide some organising principles for you. You might also like to consider the following prompts (from *Challenging conceptions of teaching: Some prompts for good practice*, Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, 1992).

Designing for learning: How do you ensure there is consistency between your subject objectives, the ways in which you teach and the ways in which you assess?

Relating to students: In what ways do you provide personal assistance to students?

Teaching or learning: What range of teaching and learning strategies do you employ? In which ways have you modified your teaching over the years?

Assessing & feedback: How do you help students to identify their specific strengths and weaknesses?



centre for the study of higher education

Evaluating: How do you act on the information you collect?

Developing professionally: How do you keep up-to-date with your teaching?

Influencing your context: In what ways do you contribute to the enhancement of teaching across your department?

Checklist for description of quality of teaching and teaching achievements

The following checklist is based on one possible format for presenting an argument for the quality of your teaching.

PREAMBLE

- Clear statement of personal philosophy
- Summary of nature and extent of experience
- Summary of main claims to effectiveness/excellence

BODY OF ARGUMENT AND EVIDENCE

(looking for cycles of explanation, argument and supporting evidence)

- Clarity of explanation
- Appropriateness of the ordering of items
- Inclusion of adequate evidence
- Reference to sources of other evidence
- Inclusion of evaluation findings
- Mention of action taken on evaluation findings



centre for the study of higher education

OVERALL

- Strength/coherency of argument
- Number of points in support of central argument
- Focus on relationship between teaching and learning
- Indications of awareness of theoretical perspectives on teaching and learning
- Indications of thoughtful approaches to evaluation