



# CHERTL Brief Guide to the Development of a Teaching Portfolio

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, due to the changing and challenging context of higher education (in South Africa and elsewhere), it has become increasingly important for universities to be able to assure the quality of the teaching and learning experiences they offer to students. Teaching portfolios<sup>1</sup> have gained popularity as a means of documenting good teaching both at institutional and personal levels. The extent to which teaching portfolios have become part of academic life in many parts of the world is seen in the requirement of many institutions that a portfolio should be submitted along with a curriculum vita when application is made for a post.

The value of a teaching portfolio goes beyond the need to simply document good teaching. The process of developing a portfolio can also be valuable in providing a space for developing individuals as teachers. In spite of their initial reluctance to the idea, many lecturers report the construction of a teaching portfolio as an “empowering” experience because of the way it allows them to *reflect* on and, importantly, identify areas of their practice that they might want to change or develop in some way.

Lecturers new to Rhodes University are required to submit a teaching portfolio as part of the University’s probationary requirements. In addition, all lecturers applying for promotion to all levels are also required to submit evidence of their teaching activities. As will be seen below, the criteria for assessing portfolios for both probation and promotion are aligned. The idea being that the portfolio is seen as a work in progress which can be used throughout your teaching career both to provide evidence of your work but also as a place for you to reflect on your on-going development as a teacher in your discipline.

## 2. Criteria used for assessing your teaching portfolio

All portfolios are assessed by two academic peers who are part of the University’s Portfolio Assessment Committee. Members of the Committee are nominated by Deans of faculties and assessors for individual portfolios are also nominated by relevant deans. See Appendix 1 for a copy of the assessment template used for portfolios for probation and Appendix 2 for the criteria used for portfolios/teaching evidence submitted for promotion purposes. When preparing for promotion it is recommended that you consult the Policy and Procedures for the Personal Promotion of Academic Staff (available at <http://www.ru.ac.za/humanresources/academicstaffmatters/recognitionandreward/personalpromotion/>).

This short guide is intended to provide ideas for getting started with building a portfolio for both probation and promotion purposes.

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as “Teaching evidence” at Rhodes.

It is important to note that the portfolio assessors will take into account the number of years you have been a teacher in higher education, whether you are applying for tenure or promotion purposes and in the case of the latter also the level to which you are applying for promotion. A portfolio constructed by a lecturer with only two or three years' teaching experience will be very different from one by a professor with thirty years' experience. What is important is to give the reader of your portfolio an accurate 'picture' of yourself as educator.

As with any assessment event, it is useful in the construction of your portfolio to be guided by the criteria that will be used to assess it. Although innovative and creative ways of constructing a portfolio are encouraged, for both types of portfolio the following key areas need to be addressed:

- Teaching practice
- Scholarly teaching and learning
- Curriculum practice
- Leadership.

It is not necessary for you to use these as headings to structure for your portfolio but it is worth checking that you have addressed each of these areas somewhere in the document.

### **3. Teaching practice: An explanation of what you teach and how you teach it**

There are a number of ways in which this information can be organised. You could present the information by listing the courses you teach and by describing the way you teach each of those courses. If you teach a number of courses, this method could become quite laboured. An alternative would be to group your teaching responsibilities according to year level or according to whether they are undergraduate or postgraduate. Another method would be to distinguish between practicals, tutorials and lectures or to use content area of the discipline itself as an organising principle.

Regardless of the way you decide to organise the information about your teaching responsibilities, you will need to try to relate the *way* you teach to *what* you teach. If, for example, you have described your teaching responsibilities according to academic level, you could think about whether your teaching of undergraduate students differs to your teaching of graduates (don't forget that postgraduate supervision is also part of your teaching). In this case, factors that could determine any differences in this teaching would be the size of the classes and the experience and knowledge of the discipline that students bring to the teaching situation.

In thinking about the *way* you teach, you will need to try to identify your particular 'style' of teaching. The following questions may be helpful in thinking about this:

- Do you ever give students questions to discuss in small groups in class?
- Do you prepare handouts?
- Do you use the overhead projector/blackboard/PowerPoint extensively?
- Do you remain standing behind the lectern for the entire class or do you try to move around the class to interact with students?
- Do you give students opportunities to discuss things during lectures?

- Do you believe your job is to transmit knowledge or do you believe students have to construct their own understandings of the discipline?
- Do you try to teach the ‘whole’ student or just the cognitive, intellectual part of the student?
- Do you give students tasks that they are expected to prepare in advance of the lecture?
- How do you handle students who arrive late/talk in the lecture room?
- How do you assess students’ work?
- What sort of comments do you write on work you mark?

Another way to try to identify the salient characteristics of your teaching would be to imagine how your students would describe the way you teach.

**This section should include:**

- A description of teaching methods and practices used in different teaching contexts
- A description of teaching and learning strategies employed
- Evidence of teaching which inducts students into the discipline
- A description of the implications of diversity for your teaching and effective ways of dealing with diversity
- Evidence, where appropriate, that technology has been used to enhance learning
- Evidence which shows how assessment is congruent with the outcomes/goals for the course
- Evidence of formative feedback which develops student learning
- Evidence that students are provided with assessment criteria for major tasks
- Evidence of professional/clinical practice supervision (where appropriate)

**4. Scholarly teaching and learning: Why you teach in the way you do**

Every act of teaching rests upon some sort of implicit theory of learning. If, for example, you regularly divide your class up into small groups for discussion, you presumably do so because you believe this contributes to their learning in some way. Your statement of teaching philosophy tries to uncover or reveal the theories about teaching and learning on which your practice rests.

Describing the theories behind your teaching does not necessarily mean you have to rush off and consult the educational literature in order to cite the authorities. These would add weight to your ideas but essentially a teaching portfolio requires you to talk about *your* theories and beliefs about teaching and learning in your discipline. You may well find, at some point, that the things you believe about teaching and learning are, in fact, part of an established theory or theories. Alternatively, you may actually base your teaching on some theoretical or practical ‘input’ about teaching you have encountered in the course of discussions, reading or attending workshops and conferences. In this case you will be able to cite the source of your beliefs. Many lecturers have found it useful to consult journals on the teaching/pedagogy of their particular disciplines. If you have undertaken an Assessors’ Course or done other modules of the Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education you could draw on the resources, materials and discussions during that engagement.

The statement of teaching philosophy does not have to be separate from the statement of teaching responsibilities. An attempt to describe what you do leads quite naturally into a description of why you do it – or vice versa.

**This section should include:**

- ❑ A clearly articulated philosophy of teaching and learning
- ❑ Evidence of the significance of the University's teaching and learning policies for teaching practice <http://www.ru.ac.za/rhodes/governance/rupolicies>
- ❑ Evidence of understanding the implications of your view of learning for teaching
- ❑ Evidence of coherence between what you do (your teaching practice) and your beliefs about how learning happens in your discipline and how teaching should facilitate students' learning

If you have engaged in any research into teaching and learning, participated in educational conferences, workshops/seminars/courses, or been involved in the review of articles for educational journals you should discuss these and the impact of these on your practice.

## **5. Curriculum practice**

Designing appropriate and relevant curricula for your courses is central to your role as an academic. You need to provide evidence of having used your knowledge of your discipline to design curricula which will ensure that students are inducted into disciplinary ways of knowing, that are responsive to the diverse needs of a diverse student body and which are internally aligned with respect to purpose, outcomes, teaching and learning activities, assessment methods and criteria.

**This section should include:**

- ❑ Discussion of your curriculum design processes
- ❑ Examples of curriculum documentation which demonstrates alignment of all the components of the curriculum (and alignment with the qualification the course is part of)
- ❑ Evidence of assessment processes, tasks and criteria which are accountable and transparent
- ❑ Examples of student & peer feedback (including external examiners' reports)
- ❑ Discussion of future curriculum decisions in responses to feedback
- ❑ Evidence of regular curriculum review and rearticulation

## **6. Leadership**

How you approach this section of the portfolio will depend on where you are in your academic career. If you have just started you may not yet have taken up any significant leadership positions related to teaching and learning. Leadership could be within your department (e.g. head of department, course co-ordinator, tutor co-ordinator, mentoring of less experienced staff, etc.); or could be related to your faculty (e.g. faculty committees), your

discipline (e.g. external examining, reviewing of programmes at other universities, etc.) or to professional bodies with which you may be involved.

**If appropriate to your context, this section should include:**

- Discussion of leadership roles you have occupied
- Discussion of feedback you have received on those roles and how you have responded to that feedback

## **7. Providing evidence: how others experience your teaching**

Implicit in the sections discussed above is the need to provide evidence for the claims you make about your practice. One of the ways of doing this is by including discussion of how others experience your teaching<sup>2</sup>. This can be based on the evaluation data on your teaching and courses that you have collected, and attempts to justify that what you do in the way of teaching is, indeed, ‘good’ for your context.

In order to evaluate your teaching, you need to know which aspects of your teaching you want to evaluate. Beginning the process of building a portfolio by writing (albeit in draft or note form) about what you do and why you do it allows you to identify those aspects of your teaching which you need to evaluate to prove that they do, indeed, ‘work’ and are thus ‘good’. In many respects, evaluation is a form of research into your teaching. By writing about your teaching responsibilities and methods, your teaching philosophy, your curriculum development practices and your leadership roles, you have set up a claim that ‘Teaching these students in these ways helps them to learn’. As in all forms of research, you now need to try to justify that claim and, if you can’t do this, modify what you do in some way.

It is often helpful to think of evaluation as trying to take a photograph of your teaching from different perspectives or angles using different lenses. For example, you can try to find out how students perceive your teaching. In order to do this, you might decide to use a questionnaire that asks them to respond to a series of statements about your teaching using a scale ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. In many respects, this would be like taking a picture using a wide angled lens. Having taken that picture, you could then ‘zoom’ in on the things you see in the picture using other evaluation techniques such as free-form responses to questions or interviews with groups of students.

Another important perspective is that of your peers who can observe your teaching or examine your course documentation. Before asking your peers to do this, however, it is important to establish what it is you want their opinion on. If you do not do this, you may end up with unfocussed evaluation data that will not give you very much information about the things you are trying to examine. You will therefore need to discuss with your peer evaluator what you do in your teaching or in your course and ask them to give an opinion about whether or not it ‘works’.

Other forms of peer feedback such as external examiners’ reports or comments from people working in your field could also provide a valid perspective on your practice.

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<sup>2</sup> It is advisable to consult the University Policy on the Evaluation of Teaching and Courses and the CHERTL Brief Guide to Evaluation.

You can also use the published literature as another perspective on what you do. If, for example, you make group work a regular feature of your teaching, you could cite examples of other cases of people using group work from the literature or back up your claim that group work is an effective way to teach by referring to some of the ‘established’ theories which underpin its use.

The final perspective is your own. Whenever you elicit evaluation data from peers or from students, you can always ‘talk back’ to that evaluation from your own perspective. Students, for example, might complain that the workload in your course is too heavy. You could ‘talk back’ to that observation by saying, for example, that it is possible to do a lot of the preparation for assignments and other tasks in class.

One very important thing to remember about evaluation is that a negative evaluation is only a problem if it is left unmanaged. In many respects, the portfolio is about trying to uncover the lack of consistency or ‘fit’ between what you do, why you do it and how others experience what you do. Once the lack of consistency has been uncovered, development can occur. A ‘good’ evaluation is therefore one which succeeds in revealing problems and a ‘good’ portfolio is one which reflects on those problems in order to address them through the adaptation of teaching styles and strategies or further course development.

#### **This section could include:**

- ❑ A rationale for your choices of evaluation methods e.g. student, peer evaluation
- ❑ A description and examples of instruments used to evaluate your practice
- ❑ Evidence of critical reflection on the evaluation data and of insights from evaluation being used to develop/improve practice

### **8. Further important points**

Master teachers are not born; they *become*. They become primarily by developing a habit of mind, a way of looking critically at the work they do; by developing the courage to recognise faults, and by struggling to improve (Common 1989:385).

The common sense understanding of a portfolio is that of a file or folder into which one puts ‘best’ work. However, in order to develop and enhance teaching, we would like to suggest that the portfolio should function as more than a ‘container’ since it has to provide a means through which lecturers can *reflect* on the strengths and weaknesses of their practice as educators in order to identify which aspects of that practice need to be developed.

A portfolio generally consists of a ‘reflective heart’, which argues

**This is what I do and this is why I do it**



**This is how others experience what I do**



### **This is how I will modify what I do or what I believe in the light of how others experience my work**

and a set of appendices which provides examples of your work and a sample/set of evaluation data which you have gathered. The purpose of the appendices is to provide evidence for statements or descriptions contained in the ‘heart’ of the portfolio. A portfolio that is simply a container into which a large amount of unmediated, unexplained evidence has been inserted would not achieve its purpose of facilitating reflection intended to further development. The most significant part of the portfolio is the ‘reflective heart’.

### **9. The portfolio is never finished...**

The concept of the portfolio as something you can open and close at will is important since, ideally, it is a structure you use to reflect on your teaching on an *on-going basis*. As such, the portfolio is never ‘finished’. Reopening a portfolio after some time has elapsed can often result in a ‘Did I really believe that?’ or ‘Did I really do that?’ experience akin to that of looking at old photographs (‘Did I really look like that?’). Reworking the portfolio to reflect your changed views and opinions is not only developmental in itself, since it forces you to scrutinise those views and opinions, but is also a way of measuring one’s own development. As such, building a portfolio can be an enormously rewarding experience.

The portfolio that you build to satisfy probationary requirements can, at a later stage in our career, thus be revised or added to for the purposes of applying for personal promotion.

### **10. The process of submitting a portfolio**

Lecturers working towards meeting Rhodes University’s probationary requirements or intending to apply for personal promotion are required to build a portfolio in order to provide evidence of their competence and expertise as teachers.

Lecturers are strongly advised to follow the process below when submitting a portfolio:

1. Put together a draft portfolio, referring to this *Guide* and the portfolio assessment criteria at the end of this booklet (**Appendices 1 & 2**). The *Brief Guide to the Evaluation of Teaching and Courses* may also be helpful.
2. Consult one of the CHERTL staff (or a trusted colleague who is aware of current issues in teaching and learning) to read and comment on your work.
3. Redraft the portfolio in response to feedback.
4. Submit your final portfolio to the Human Resources Department. Please indicate the level of promotion or tenure you are applying for e.g. lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor. Dates for submission of portfolios for promotion are announced on Toplist each year. A staff member from the Human Resources division usually communicates with lecturers each year to request submission of portfolios for probationary purposes. You are advised to begin collecting data and ideas for your portfolio from the start of your teaching career at Rhodes. It is also a useful document for your Head of Department to read when s/he writes the annual report on your progress.

## **11. Support for the portfolio building process**

Staff members are encouraged to visit CHERTL's RUconnected site 'Teaching Portfolio for tenure or promotion' for suggestions, texts and resources which may be helpful when constructing your portfolio: <http://ruconnected.ru.ac.za/course/view.php?id=1167>. CHERTL staff members also provide the support for the portfolio building process by offering campus-wide workshops once or twice a year. These are advertised on Toplist. Lecturers wishing to discuss their portfolios or who would like feedback on draft portfolios are welcome to contact CHERTL Office Administrator, Nomfundo Siqwede ([n.siqwede@ru.ac.za](mailto:n.siqwede@ru.ac.za); 8171) or any other CHERTL staff members.