Teaching Portfolios: An Effective Strategy for Faculty Development in Occupational Therapy

John Zubizarreta

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The national movement in higher education toward the use of teaching portfolios for improvement of teaching, personnel decisions, and other crucial activities of the professorate is at an unprecedented height. The teaching portfolio has many versatile applications. Faculty and administrators are interested in learning how to write portfolios for personal improvement or are interested in exploring ways of using portfolios for faculty development; for tenure and promotion considerations; for conferring teaching awards, merit pay, and release time; for screening job candidates; or for funding of professional enhancement projects, fellowships, and grants. According to Seldin (1997), “It is estimated that as many as 1,000 colleges and universities in the United States are using or experimenting with portfolios. That is a stunning jump from the approximately 10 institutions thought to be using portfolios in 1990” (p. 2). A portfolio written specifically for courses can help both teachers and administrators identify, study, and enhance the unique philosophies, methods, materials, student and peer reviews, outcomes, and goals of occupational therapy teaching. The efficacy of portfolio writing is especially realized when occupational therapy faculty and administrators collaborate to examine a portfolio’s varied, useful information about teaching and learning in the discipline. Such a portfolio adds considerable value to a teacher’s overall professional growth and unique contributions to the profession.

A popular syndicated comic strip depicts a harried, confused teacher gazing in shock at a glib evaluator who delivers the disconcerting news: “Your evaluation is based on what you do in the next 60 seconds. Go!” The scenario is common in higher education: For a long time, improvement and evaluation have been disconnected, and the evaluation of teaching has been the ground for misconception, miscommunication, and frustration. Readers of The American Journal of Occupational Therapy may agree that in allied medical fields, the situation portrayed in the comic pages is further complicated by a traditional focus on clinical practice and a perception that technically prepared, competent, clinical practitioners are equally ready to assume the responsibilities of managing effective teaching and learning in the classroom. This article describes an innovation in teaching improvement and evaluation that may transform and enhance the practice of occupational therapy faculty members who discover the benefits of writing and maintaining teaching portfolios. How does the therapist-now-professor blend practitioner skills with the art of teaching? How does clinical expertise translate into teaching effectiveness? How does the occupational therapy teacher know that students learn appreciably in the classroom? How does the instructor communicate to others the quality of one’s teaching? What structures exist to help the


occupational therapy professor know how to improve teaching performance and learning outcomes?

The special challenge of the occupational therapy practitioner embracing the role of faculty member is to discover a formative process of continual improvement that will also serve as an authentic assessment of teaching and learning within the particular disciplinary boundaries of occupational therapy. In essence, how can occupational therapy faculty members engage in systematic efforts to:

- Strengthen classroom performance
- Examine one's teaching philosophy and practice
- Measure the impact of teaching on student learning
- Articulate exactly why and how the classroom environment relates to both content area theory and field experience
- Harness the benefits of peer collaboration and mentoring in improving and assessing faculty performance
- Provide concrete documentation for valid evaluation

Although other means achieve such complex aims, the teaching portfolio is a powerful tool for fostering reflective practice and for creating an ongoing record of substantial evidence. Teaching portfolios can set the stage for meaningful collaboration in a system of evaluation that is based appropriately on recorded evidence of improvement and demonstrated positive outcomes of student learning.

What Is a Teaching Portfolio?

For many faculty members, the teaching portfolio provides the needed formal process for making sweeping changes in pedagogy and methodology, revisions that improve student learning. As a process and an instrument that grow out of substantial reflection and analysis tied to hard evidence and to the scrutiny and support of collaborative peer review, the teaching portfolio also offers teachers a credible system for valid evaluation of performance. It uses a discipline-based format that validates the individuality and integrity of teaching, serving as a catalyst for substantive improvement of the philosophy, strategies, materials, outcomes, evaluations, and goals of teaching within specific content areas.

In a compact statement, a teaching portfolio is an evidence-based, written document in which a faculty member concisely organizes selective details of teaching accomplishments and effort and uses such information to document his or her teaching enterprise. More importantly, the faculty member uses the information for reflective analysis, leading to improvement of teaching and student learning. As such, the portfolio emphasizes the kind of reflective practice that leads to viable conclusions about instructional performance and the extent of real student learning. Consequently, the portfolio provides the impetus for improvement and lays the groundwork for effective evaluation that is based on real evidence. Writing a portfolio reveals that vigorous teaching and diligent scholarship are inseparable facets of the professorate in general and that—specifically in occupational therapy—careful, effective teaching and improved clinical practice are interwoven dimensions of the profession.

When used for improvement, investment in a teaching portfolio is voluntary. Faculty members reap considerable benefits when they elect to write a portfolio with the collaboration of a knowledgeable, supportive mentor and with the consent and help of a department chairperson or other supervisor. The intentional focus on reflective practice can produce better teaching and learning and better cooperation and communication between faculty and administrators. The portfolio concept needs to be introduced by faculty as a process for improvement rather than by administrators as an assessment, although portfolios, over time and after faculty members have tested the portfolio’s potentials and shortcomings, can be a powerful component of a more comprehensive system of teaching evaluation.

Faculty members regularly revise their portfolios in such a way that goes beyond routine replacement of evidential materials in a file folder, stressing additionally (or instead) a concise, written review of the relationship of present teaching performance to ongoing student learning. In the act of writing critically about current, actual teaching efforts and in constructing a rhetorical framework that compels the teacher to gather supporting materials, analyze information, draw substantial conclusions, and posit action plans for better practice, the teacher cultivates a habit of intentional improvement that is based on a regular and timely process of portfolio development. A serviceable portfolio is not a one-time effort, but a concentrated document that records progressive levels of achievement and sets specific goals.

The Contents of a Portfolio

A teaching portfolio allows the faculty member to critically study teaching responsibilities, philosophy, methodologies, materials, student ratings, peer reviews, efforts to improve teaching, and goals. If the primary purpose is teaching improvement, then the teacher gains nothing from choosing only evidence of success. If in the portfolio an instructor articulates the values of experimentation and growth in teaching, then inclusion of disappointing experiences is proof not of failure but of vigorous commitment to improvement. If a department chairperson coordinates with faculty to state as a departmental mission the same charges, then the portfolio is compelling proof of the vitality of instruction at the classroom level and of commitment to teaching improvement and support at the departmental level. The same is true at the institutional level if an institution articulates teaching development and effectiveness as strong parts of its mission. For occupational therapy faculty, such a high degree of collaboration and of connections among the levels of individual practitioners, departmental priorities, and institutional mission provides an enriched setting in which occupational therapy education can be...
Ample information about the contents and format of a teaching portfolio may be found in Shore et al. (1986); Edgerton, Hutchings, and Quinlan (1991); and Seldin (1993, 1997). Seldin’s model is the most cogent and practical, focusing on a compact narrative, with supplementary materials that support and document the compressed information in the written body of the portfolio. In addition to suggesting models for the composition of portfolios, the literature on portfolio development advocates the collaboration of a mentor who helps guide the process and keeps the mentoree focused on the purpose of improvement through rigorous analysis of hard evidence.

A sound portfolio is a reflective document of 8 to 10 pages that contain selective information from three major areas that may include the following items:

1. Information from oneself: teaching responsibilities, reflective statement of teaching philosophy in occupational therapy courses, description and analysis of methodologies pertinent to teaching occupational therapy, materials used in the classroom to facilitate learning, teaching development activities, and short-term and long-term instructional goals.

2. Information from others: regular student and peer assessments and ratings, year-end evaluations by chairperson and dean, honors and awards, and unsolicited letters.

3. Products of student learning: pretests and posttests of learning; evidence of students’ success on board exams, occupational therapy licensure, certification, and job placement; recorded classroom evaluation activities; student exams, laboratory reports, projects, presentations, publications, and essays or research in drafts with instructor’s formative feedback; and alumni assessments.

The types of detailed evidence will vary with discipline, experience, and purpose, and the list is only suggestive; however, in collecting such information and in activating the complementary processes of individual reflection and collaboration with a mentor, the faculty member cultivates improvement by engaging the following strategies:

- Identifying specific instructional and teaching-related duties in occupational therapy and how such responsibilities fit into the professor’s teaching load, outside clinical practice, and other assignments.
- Articulating a teaching philosophy that is focused on disciplinary values in occupational therapy.
- Describing, analyzing, and evaluating course materials, methods, and outcomes.
- Examining teaching objectives and competencies that are unique to occupational therapy courses.
- Studying student and peer reviews and formulating an action plan for improvement.
- Providing concrete, supportive documentation of performance.
- Positing specific teaching goals to strengthen individual occupational therapy courses and to enhance one’s professional development as an occupational therapy teaching professional.

Such self-conscious planning can result in sound evaluation and better teaching, especially if the portfolio is revised regularly.

The information collected from the three broad areas is organized into main headings that reflect the various selected facets of a teacher’s work. For example, a sample table of contents organized exclusively for improvement may include the following areas: (a) statement of teaching responsibilities; (b) teaching philosophy; (c) analysis of strategies and methods; (d) teaching materials (syllabi, handouts, exams, essay topics, reading lists, Web pages); (e) assessment of student learning; (f) examination of student ratings; (g) survey of peer, chairperson, dean evaluations; (h) study of the impact of improvement activities (conferences, workshops, committee involvements, peer review, collaborative team work); and (i) teaching goals, including short-term, long-term, ongoing efforts. Notice the accent on reflection, analysis, and action planning. On the other hand, if the purpose of a portfolio should shift at a particular time in a professor’s career to providing a documentary profile of “best practice” for personnel decisions, then the balance in the content of the narrative and the type, amount, and diversity of supportive evidence in the appendix may alter understandably in strategic emphasis.

In either case, the narrative or reflective portion of the portfolio is meticulously connected to documentation in an appendix, the hard data needed for clear, honest evaluation and thoughtful, reasonable goals. Every major claim or analysis of teaching performance in the portfolio’s narrative body is balanced by selected, concrete evidence in corresponding appendices. As the professor develops a section on methodology, student evaluations, or classroom assessment outcomes, each reflective statement is documented in an appropriately labeled appendix. If, for example, the instructor notes that a particular assignment has proven significantly to strengthen student learning of disciplinary content, then evidence might include the assignment sheet, auxiliary handouts, case studies, or problem-solving models in an appendix labeled “Materials.” Additionally, samples of selected student work in developmental stages might be included in an appendix labeled “Products of Student Learning.” Such strong attention to both critical reflection and evidential information sets the stage for substantial improvement on the basis of research-based analysis of selected dimensions of teaching.

One of the principal concerns about portfolio development is its grounding in selected details. However, the potential bias of selectivity is diminished by a clear articu-
loration of the portfolio’s core value on improvement, a quality that makes it unnecessary to hide information as long as the teacher’s motive is to highlight risks, challenges, disappointments, and successes in the context of improving student learning. Another factor that stems bias is the rigorous emphasis on hard evidence, the documentation appearing in the appendix to support all claims and reflection in the narrative. The valuable appendix offers the information necessary for both thorough evaluation and real, recorded improvement. Additionally, the involvement of a supportive and vigilant mentor helps to keep the faculty member aware of the importance of recorded data and realistic goals that stay in sync with departmental, institutional, and professional directions.

In compiling information in all three broad areas, the professor will scrutinize the connections among philosophy, methods, course materials, student feedback, peer reviews, and outcomes of learning. Using the portfolio to collect such details and recognizing the importance of coherence among the various dimensions of the instrument, the professor becomes thoughtful and intentional in examining products and materials generated by self and others to verify the extent of actual student learning.

The Value of a Mentor

Collaboration with a mentor is essential to produce a quality portfolio. The temptation to work privately is great because of the inherent tendency of teachers to protect the valuable autonomy of their efforts. However, one of the most rewarding, crucial facets of the portfolio process is the collaborative effort between the instructor and the mentor, who helps steer the direction of the document to meet the needs of improvement and evaluation. Often, mentors are trained faculty consultants from different institutions and disciplines, allowing mentor and mentoree to focus not on disciplinary or institutionalized political issues, but on analyzing and documenting teaching performance. Faculty development personnel in teaching and learning centers can also serve as effective mentors if they are expert in portfolio development strategies. The three-step mentoring process described by Annis (1993) enables a committed cadre of faculty to extend their experience in an initial workshop to others in their schools, helping to create a growing climate of collaboration among faculty members. Some institutions encourage a three-person team approach to mentoring, involving a mentor from within the department and one from outside in order to offer the mentoree a variety of perspectives and suggestions. Regardless of model, collaboration on the development of a portfolio is voluntary and faculty driven, breaching the delicate boundaries of teaching autonomy and inviting open, supportive examination of teaching performance in a specific setting. Both mentors and mentorees have only one real objective in such an enterprise—to enhance the quality of teaching and learning—and mentors keep faculty members fixed exclusively on that specific aim.

The mentoring process is a fundamental component of portfolio drafting, and a faculty member can produce a valid and useful document in 4 or 5 days of concentrated work with a mentor in a highly structured workshop setting. Faculty members often fear that a portfolio is an exhausting, complete history of teaching that includes every minute detail of their career. Instead, a portfolio is a selective profile of current teaching accomplishment and effort, only one part of what should be both a more diverse plan for improvement and a more comprehensive system of evaluation. Depending on the faculty member’s purpose for writing a portfolio, topics are developed and evidence gathered because they highlight the faculty member’s range of responsibilities, pedagogical values, strategic successes and disappointments, representative materials, evaluations, opportunities for improvement, and goals.

A trained and supportive mentor ensures that a succinct portfolio fashioned after Seldin’s (1993, 1997) model does not require wading through scores of teaching artifacts with accompanying separate narrative assessments, the basis for other portfolio models (Edgerton et al., 1991). When collaboration occurs initially in a concentrated workshop format, the focus of portfolio development is more readily kept on a succinct and highly effective process of teaching enhancement through meticulous, timely, objective inspection of evidence.

Can Occupational Therapy Benefit From Portfolios?

Occupational therapy practitioners in faculty roles are eager for the stimulating improvement that results from critical reflection, conscientious practice, and supportive collaboration. Occupational therapy faculty members rely on conventional student ratings for course and teaching performance assessment. They use a variety of methods and pedagogies to engage students and to help prepare them for careers of further study. Additionally, many are aware of the importance of strategic planning goals, objectives, materials, activities, and structures of assessment when creating a positive learning environment in their classrooms, a place where students can learn to fuse concepts with real experiences. However, it is not atypical for faculty members in any discipline to have little or no peer review interactions, a typical sign of how teaching is largely an isolated venture that omits some of the most salient benefits of portfolio development—those of the practical improvement and intellectual enhancement that grow out of a process grounded in collaboration and mentoring.

Improvement, then, is the segue to the value of teaching portfolios. The portfolio can provide the process and formal structure for expanding and diversifying the kinds of information about teaching that can help professors gain a clearer view of performance. Student rating forms are a reliable assessment but should not be the only one. Port-
folios help flush out information not entirely evident in a single measure of teaching effectiveness. Although some faculty members vary approaches and design curriculum and materials conscientiously, how do they document the extent of their efforts to provide both a recorded baseline for further reflection, risk taking, and fresh approaches and a meticulous accounting of performance with multiple sources of evidence for sound evaluation? How do the occupational therapy faculty members interested in exploring alternative engagement with students discover, test, and assess experiments in pedagogy and methodology in a way that promotes improvement and lays a strong foundation for positive evaluation? The portfolio is neither the only useful vehicle for such reflection and collaboration nor the only method of evaluating teaching. But it is a process document that blends both of these vital activities of good teaching. Faculty members who perceive their teaching to be good would have in a teaching portfolio a powerful means of supporting their deserved confidence at the same time that they would have a framework for improvement through reflection and collaboration.

Conclusion

If we take seriously the current call in higher education for more emphasis on accountability, evaluation, and productivity, the model of reflective practice demonstrated by the teaching portfolio emerges as one solution for the need to improve the standards of teaching and learning in the academy. Other methods of strengthening the connection between teaching and learning exist and should be implemented just as carefully and widely as portfolio strategies. If developed properly with the coaching of a supportive mentor, portfolios challenge us consistently to reexamine what and how we teach and, more importantly, why, with the aim of improving our facilitation of student learning. In a field like occupational therapy in which teaching and clinical practice are integrally connected because of the importance of developing in an educational setting both conceptual and experiential skills, the professor dedicated to the paramount goal of student learning must cultivate the potential for better teaching and learning inherent in the ongoing processes of reflection, analysis, evaluation, and goal setting. The teaching portfolio is a structure for such engaged and transformative faculty development, a step in the right direction away from our initially discouraged and disempowered comic strip teacher.

References


