

## The NYU Center for Teaching Excellence

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## Recasting the Teaching Portfolio

*From the December 1997 edition of The Teaching Professor*

by Kenneth R. Bain and James M. Lang

In recent years a great deal of thought energy and writing has been devoted to defining the teaching portfolio. Despite its popularity as a subject of research, we have not seen a correspondingly widespread increase in the use of teaching portfolios, particularly by faculty at research universities where the reward structure still focuses on scholarly productivity.

We believe there are actually quite good reasons why administrators are unwilling to rely more heavily on teaching portfolios in the hiring, promotion, and tenure evaluations of faculty. One of those reasons is that the teaching portfolio is often treated as a *container*. Into this container a teacher pours products and descriptions of teaching: statements of teaching philosophy, course syllabi, evaluations from administrators and/or peers, student ratings, sample assignments, exemplary student work, evidence of membership in teaching associations, publications on teaching, etc. The list of items eligible for inclusion is potentially endless--one recent book catalogs over 60 possible items that teachers might include in their portfolios.

As a result of this container approach, the contents of portfolios have no consistency across faculty members or disciplines, a situation which leaves administrators and promotion and tenure committees understandably frustrated and reluctant to rely heavily on them to evaluate teaching. At a Focus on Teaching Conference several years ago, our Provost observed that "while the dossiers [or teaching portfolios] are enormously improved with respect to the level of attention given to teaching, the documentation is not working very well."

We cannot and should not combat this lack of focus by mandating a rigid set of materials to be included in every portfolio. One of the inherent strengths of the portfolio is its flexibility: the way it can accommodate diverse teaching styles, varied levels of commitment to teaching, and multiple forms of evidence. Instead, we propose that we change the container model by reconceptualizing the portfolio as an argument.

In this conception, the model for portfolios is the scholarly project: it should contain a thesis statement, pieces of evidence, descriptions and analysis of that evidence, and a conclusion.

Consider each of these four components more at length. The statement of teaching philosophy lays out the portfolio's thesis. It anchors the portfolio and provides the scaffolding for the evidence that follows. Roughly, the statement of teaching philosophy should answer two questions: 1) What do you expect your students to be able to do intellectually (or physically or emotionally) as a result of taking the course? and 2) How will you help them acquire those abilities?

Evidence included should demonstrate the following: the worth of course objectives; strategies used to communicate those objectives and to help students attain them; means used to evaluate students' progress towards those goals; and efforts taken to evaluate and improve faculty effectiveness in these areas. For example, a brief essay might indicate the worth of course objectives and their relationship to larger questions that animate the discipline; sample course assignments can reflect strategies to help students attain the course's objectives; sample student work may suggest how well students are learning.

As for the analysis and description of these items, we believe the material should be linked through a written analysis of the evidence. How do the included items reflect the effectiveness of the teacher? What are the key components of each piece of evidence? When we teach students writing, we repeatedly insist that simply offering quotations from texts does not constitute an argument. Why should the pieces of evidence in a teaching portfolio be any different? Brief analytic descriptions must link the evidence to conclusions.

Finally, the portfolio's conclusion might both summarize the argument and suggest future directions for further developing teaching and learning.

We believe that teaching portfolios constructed along these lines will help administrators and faculty understand their value and use them more frequently. Faculty members who may resist assembling a portfolio from a potentially bewildering array of items can more effectively make a case for their teaching because every college teacher knows how to construct an argument--and knows the value of building a case both in terms of clarifying and furthering individual thinking and then having that work evaluated by others.

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194 Mercer Street, 4th Floor, New York, New York 10012  
(212) 998-2200 [center.for.teaching@nyu.edu](mailto:center.for.teaching@nyu.edu)