

Reflective Teaching Portfolios for Continuous Professional Development at Trinity College Dublin

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Context and Objectives

Portfolios have much to offer the teaching profession. When teachers carefully examine their own practices, those practices are likely to improve (Wolf 1996, p. 37).

The Centre for Academic Practice and Student Learning (CAPSL) at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) is in its third year of offering academic staff members a programme on developing reflective teaching portfolios. The programme's objective is to support academic staff within a socially constructed context to develop reflective teaching portfolios that encourage analysis and evaluation of teaching that positively impacts on student learning. This case study describes the programme's theoretical grounding and how this theory is implemented in practice.

Teaching portfolios differ enormously according to their purpose. As a means of facilitating continuing professional development, the portfolio we espouse aligns with the concept of 'praxis', which is 'informed, committed action' (Kemmis 1985, p.141). Our portfolio is substantially reflective, identifying successes, weaknesses and progress towards positive changes in teaching practice. Whereas a more summative portfolio that focuses on documenting achievements may be appropriate for promotion, awards and similar accomplishments, our programme is formative and aims to effect change through reflection. This is consistent with Nona Lyons' concept of the reflective teacher 'scaffolding' learning: 'Instead of presenting a set of courses and credits earned for the purposes of credentialing and certification, the teacher apprentice—or expert—stands at the center of his or her own learning, defining and defending the authority of a credential' (Lyons 1998, p. 5).

Origins of Programme

CAPSL's first portfolio programme ran over three academic terms in 2004 and 2005, and was designed and facilitated by Professor Nona Lyons¹. Lyons framed portfolio development in this programme in relation to Lee Shulman's concept of the teaching portfolio as:

a structured documented history of a (carefully selected) set of coached or mentored accomplishments substantiated by samples of student work and fully realized only through reflective writing, deliberation and serious conversation. (quoted in Lyons 1998, p. 3)

Lyons views portfolio development as the manifestation of a new professionalism in higher education, and she emphasised to us the importance of structuring our portfolio requirements to promote a coherent and long-term vision of learning and teaching development, so that the portfolios produced would be an act of theory (as advocated by Shulman) rather than an ‘elaborate scrapbook’. Although we have made minor changes to the content and structure of our programme with each subsequent cohort, these values have not changed; indeed, feedback shows that key to the success of our programme is the framework promoted by Lyons: reflection, dialogue with peers and mentoring.

Portfolio Construction

Outline of Portfolio Programme and Resources

Our current programme runs for six weeks, with weekly three-hour sessions divided into two stages. As Table 1 below shows, the sessions in Stage 1 focus on identifying participant goals, reflective writing and introducing the purpose and structure of the portfolio, whereas Stage 2 consists of four sessions devoted to professional dialogue.

Table 1: Overview of TCD Portfolio Development Programme

Stage	Session
1. Constructing a Reflective Teaching Portfolio	1. The Importance of Reflection and Evaluation 2. Developing Your Portfolio through Reflective Writing
2. Analysing Teaching	Professional Dialogue as a Social Process (4 sessions)

To support their learning in the programme, participants receive a ring binder containing section dividers with sample outlines and resources. The folder contains the following sections:

- introduction
- professional history
- teaching philosophy statement
- entries
- final reflection
- evaluation techniques
- peer feedback
- resources.

The folder and its resources are designed to encourage participants to build their literacy in learning and teaching, and we support learning by providing excerpts from texts and directing participants to additional resources. The folder also provides space in which to record, store and review portfolio writing and related documents and artefacts.

The Importance of Reflection

In Session 1, we emphasise the importance of reflection, the scholarship of teaching and of supporting inquiry using evaluation. We begin with the proposition that reflecting directly on professional practice is a core element of a teacher's work (Purse & Brockbank 1998, p. 99). This underpins our belief that a reflective teaching portfolio should be more than a miscellaneous collection of artefacts or list of professional activities and accomplishments.

Therefore, we encourage participants to become critical reflectors, engaging in higher-order thinking about and analysis of their teaching. To help them generate meaningful change, we firmly emphasise an intentional, deliberate reflection in line with Gelter's notion of a conscious, active process of focused and structured thinking that is distinct from free-floating thoughts (Gelter 2003). We promote meta-cognitive knowledge and skills, encouraging those involved to become aware of their own cognitive processes— 'thinking about thinking which detaches us from immediate action, to observe how we do things, to evaluate how well we do them, and to suggest possible ways of improving' (Cowan 1998, p. 141). It is the fusion of this process and its product (the portfolio itself) that enables participants to reflect, evaluate and further develop their professional practice through a gradual unfolding of their understandings of learning and teaching (Darling 2000).

In practical terms, this means we encourage participants to reflect not only on what did or did not go well in their teaching, but also to identify reasons for its success or failure and to construct implications for practice. This process can have several results:

- a shift in the way participants identify problems and select and monitor solutions
- a new understanding or a deeper insight that leads participants to think about how something is done
- an informed decision to leave current practices as they are
- a shift in the values and attitudes that underpin participants' teaching.

To prompt this reflective process, we introduce the participants to various formative evaluation techniques (such as 'the muddiest point', the 'one-minute paper', student surveys and self-evaluation checklists,) and suggest that they use these as a way of 'hearing' the student voice and/or recording their own voices on their teaching and their students' learning.

Developing the Portfolio through Reflective Writing: The Teaching Philosophy Statement

Session 2 focuses on using reflective writing as the basis for constructing a teaching philosophy statement and portfolio entry (described below). To begin this activity, we use free writing to trigger participants' consideration of several themes, with prompts such as 'What do I believe about teaching?' and 'How do I play that out in the classroom?' We find that free writing is an effective technique for getting participants to articulate and discuss initial responses to these key questions. We then introduce our concept of a teaching philosophy statement and outline the structure.

We define the teaching philosophy statement as a personal narrative of 400 to 600 words that codifies a lecturer’s sincerely held beliefs about learning and teaching, and we emphasise that it should show how theory is applied to the practice of teaching. Resources include sample teaching philosophy statements, which participants review and comment on. This prompts discussion and assists in identifying participants’ personal beliefs as they emerge from their teaching contexts. Additional free-writing prompts further develop participants’ initial responses by giving them opportunities to identify themes in their teaching philosophy statements as well as encouraging them to consider the central role of learners within their practice. Participants leave the session with the basis of their personal teaching philosophies, which they develop further in their own time.

Developing the Portfolio through Reflective Writing: The Portfolio Entry

Nona Lyons describes a portfolio entry as a ‘significant piece of evidence’ resulting from an inquiry into learning and teaching (2002, p. 18). An entry may focus on a specific incident or an examination of an aspect of teaching. The structure we suggest our participants follow for an entry is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Suggested Structure for TCD Portfolio Entries

Title	Name of entry (What is being explored?)
Context	Introduction to the teaching situation/relevant background information
Rationale	Why is this entry being included?
Reflection	An inquiry into teaching practice that documents what you are learning about your teaching and what remains to be explored
Implications for Practice	How has this entry changed your thinking, practice or how might it do so in the future?
Support Data	For example: syllabus, samples of student work, formative evaluation data (feedback, student survey,) assignments and so on

Finally, we provide sample portfolio entries as part of the resources, to give insight into the level of analytic detail required, and the value of identifying implications for practice.

By the end of Session 2, in addition to drafts of their teaching philosophy statements, participants have written up themes that can be developed into reflective entries.

Developing Professional Dialogue as a Social Process

After a break of a week, the next four three-hour sessions (Stage 2) in the programme require each participant to analyse their teaching by presenting to the

group either their teaching philosophy statement or portfolio entry. The group is limited to a maximum of 20 participants so that each session can allow up to five participants to present their work-in-progress for ten minutes and have ten minutes of open discussion and peer feedback. Feedback forms are used to structure written comments, which can be reviewed in greater detail by the presenters after the sessions. Participants' feedback often focuses on the value of peer dialogue; not only does it broaden their views of teaching and student learning, but it makes them realise the challenges they face are often shared by others. Typical comments on the peer evaluation process include:

- *It is both educative and reassuring.*
- *Fascinating discussion.*
- *Most useful was everybody else's ideas. I was surprised that, regardless of the department/area/subject, so many of the ideas to improve teaching and learning could be applied, or perhaps adapted and then applied.*
- *It gave me the chance to apply principles to the experiences of other participants as well.*
- *[It] enabled me to contextualise my own anxieties and concerns.*

Our peer review process is based on the idea of professional dialogue. Joy Wanless (1998) notes that 'the idea of learning as a social and collaborative process sits strangely on our traditional competitive Western education system, with its emphasis on detachment and distance, particularly for academics in higher education' (p. 147). As one of our participants commented when asked to note what he found most useful about the programme: '[I] felt collegiate for a change'.

Peer review is widely accepted in the research process; indeed, it plays an integral part in validating the scholarly aspects of academic research. If we view teaching as a professional activity also, peer review is a valuable component because as scholar-teachers it gives us a means to interact with each other, not just with our students. All professionals aspire to develop intellectually and to increase their expertise. This aspiration is familiar to lecturers in their fields of academic research, but we must also recognise and support it in relation to teaching. As one participant said, 'What I would highlight is the dearth of this type of experience in TCD. It is really motivating to think about your teaching which easily gets lost in the pressure to do research'.

Brockbank, McGill and Beech (1998) define reflective learning as a 'process which involves dialogue with others for improvement or transformation whilst recognising the emotional, social and political context of the learner' (p. 3, our emphasis). Indeed, if one accepts the Vygotskian theory of cognitive development—that thinking begins on a social plane before it becomes internalised—then a socially collaborative environment is necessary to achieve the depth of reflection we espouse.

The social nature of reflection is often identified as particularly important in the process of reflecting on practice (Richert 1992; Russell 1993; Bolton 2001). Therefore, our programme aims to provide a forum where respectful intellectual pedagogic debate and lively reflective dialogue can take place among peers as the

basis for socially constructed learning. At the very least, as Lyons points out, this dialogue makes public what too often remains hidden from public view—debate and discussion about teaching practices and what constitutes good teaching (Lyons 1998, p. 4). Undoubtedly, this is an important outcome, but there are also other advantages to this approach. When learning is limited to the insights of the individual, it can be difficult to achieve the required detachment to look critically at *oneself*; however, dialogue and reflection with others in a supportive atmosphere that encourages constructive but honest feedback has the potential to engage the teacher in an exploration of values, beliefs and practices that goes beyond their current understanding or practices.

The outcome of this, as noted time and time again in our participant feedback, is a broadening of participants' views of the learning and teaching process. We introduce them to the main theories of learning and teaching (behaviourism, cognitivism, constructivism, social constructivism), and it is the first time that many have come across these. Participants note how this shared dialogue facilitates the scholarly identification, articulation and exchange of concepts about learning, as well as strategies and devices to improve learning and teaching. Learning and discussing as a group, they begin to see why we emphasise a practice based on theory; that research into teaching can and should inform their practice; and the extent to which student learning is affected by this.

Participants value the collegial impact of the programme and emphasise the benefits of interfaculty sharing of techniques and experiences. They comment that, because their discipline areas can be quite insular, they greatly appreciate the support that comes from the diversity of faculty within the portfolio community. Not only do they learn from each other and contribute to debates on the challenges faced by their colleagues from other subject areas, they also feel the social benefits of working in a community of practice:

- *I learnt hugely from everybody else.*
- *The process was superb—great to get diverse viewpoints from colleagues in different faculties.*
- *The biggest learning was from each other.*
- *I don't feel so isolated in my career now.*

Portfolio Mentoring

The second aspect of fostering professional dialogue occurs within the mentoring relationships we set up, relationships that create opportunities for reflective and respectful critical dialogue. Our mentors come from across TCD. They can include academic developers from CAPSL, people with a strong experience in learning and teaching, or people who have won Provost Teaching Awards. Generally, however, they come from the ranks of TCD's academic staff who have previously attended a portfolio programme and/or completed a teaching portfolio.

Mentors are not presented as tutors or experts, but as peers interested in reflective practice, portfolios or learning and teaching. They act as listeners, sometimes advisors, sometimes readers. Both mentors and mentees must agree to participate in a mentoring relationship before being matched with someone (from a different

faculty or school where possible), and from then on the relationship depends on the agreed objectives of the mentoring pair.

Feedback on this aspect of the programme, from both mentors and mentees, has been consistently positive, as the comments below indicate:

- *I think this is a very worthwhile part of the course.*
- *I found the mentoring process to be of great benefit; my mentor was very helpful in viewing my work and suggesting ideas. This was following a long conversation regarding where I was coming from and going to with my teaching etc. I'm glad that I met with him.*
- *It was extremely useful to me as my mentor was very insightful as to the whole purpose of the course, and was able to give me some very useful feedback and direction on the philosophy statement I had prepared.*
- *Very useful/informative.*
- *Gave some useful insights on what the reflective process is about.*
- *Interesting also to see different perspectives on how to approach reflective process and demands of different subjects.*

Assessment of the Portfolios

One of the common concerns in evaluating portfolios is how to create a reliable and equitable assessment system, given the inevitably subjective nature of the portfolio process. Creating criteria, ensuring consistency and reviewing, even for a Pass/Fail result, can be challenging and often problematic activities. Because our Reflective Teaching Portfolio programme is formative and reflective rather than summative, we emphasise process rather than product in our evaluation. Put simply, we prefer to emphasise the evaluation of participants' teaching *through* their portfolios, rather than summatively assessing or grading the reflective teaching portfolio itself.

What we do instead is offer participants a Certificate of Completion based on a mandatory submission that consists of a written teaching philosophy statement and two portfolio entries. We view it as appropriate that the evaluation of teaching occurs through peer review, although programme instructors also offer significant formative feedback on all submitted portfolios based on the guidelines given in the introductory sessions and reinforced within the presentation sessions. We also offer broader feedback on how participants have reflected on their teaching, or how they have analysed implications for practice or any other themes presented, and we identify areas for development based on gaps or aspects that need to be explored in more detail.

Challenges in Portfolio Development

'It's so demanding. I won't have time to keep this up'

Developing a reflective teaching portfolio is undoubtedly a demanding and time-consuming process, and undoubtedly not all participants maintain their portfolios. We therefore assure participants that the outcome of this process results in opportunities for meta-reflection and collegial interactions that will help them to grow professionally. The community of practice that has arisen out of these

programmes encourages participants to meet and continue their reflective dialogue, prompting them to maintain a dynamic portfolio and to develop their interest into other areas of learning and teaching.

‘I don’t want to be judged by my peers’

Critically reflective learning is ‘necessarily disturbing as well as potentially exciting and exacting’ (McInnes, Shiels & Davis, p. 89). Participants are very welcome to showcase their individual achievements in their presentations as well as the challenges or problems they face. Most admit that this does involve an element of risk-taking, but that it is a worthwhile process, as these comments illustrate:

- *Unfortunately the culture of lecturing is that you don’t ask your peers. It has been such a worthwhile process to go through this process.*
- *I learnt it is good to criticise oneself, and to know that I am not always correct.*
- *I was dreading presenting in front of my peers but the process has empowered me as an individual.*

‘I don’t want to be seen to be judging a peer’

Building a peer community to give constructive feedback is one of our greatest challenges. Undoubtedly, it takes time to build trust among the participants so that they feel comfortable giving and receiving critically constructive and honest feedback. Whereas some participants comment on how positive it is that the environment is ‘safe for reflection’, others note that the feedback from fellow participants is ‘too nice’. In an attempt to counter this, we emphasise this challenge to each group before each presentation session, and have altered the peer feedback forms to prompt more debate. Nevertheless, participants in a recent programme noted that although the oral feedback worked well, the written feedback was still ‘too nice’ and less useful. It seems we have not yet found the right balance between creating a safe environment for reflection, and achieving a truly honest, critical reflection. A still more dialectic approach is needed.

Having said this, however, our most recent programme had only ten participants, and for the first time reflective, constructive feedback seemed to hit the desired pitch. Participants followed a simple ‘feedback sandwich’ approach initially, but after the first few presentations this was absorbed into a less formal discussion. Notably, all participants commented on the positive impact constructive feedback made, but when asked how they would feel giving such feedback in part of a group of 20, they unanimously said that it would be more difficult. According to these participants, the size of this particular group allowed a sense of trust to quickly develop. Therefore, we plan to divide our next cohort of 20 into two groups of ten (each group attending every second week), and to evaluate how this works.

‘I can’t write reflectively’

A challenging task for the participants in our programme’s multidisciplinary groups has been moving from descriptive writing to reflective writing, particularly within the short time frame of six weeks. Based on feedback from participants, we now explore Moon’s (2004) model of reflective writing and have introduced activities on levels of reflective writing. We have also prepared sample case studies that match the four

levels of reflective writing defined by Hatton and Smith (1995), which participants review and discuss in terms of depth of reflection. These initiatives assist participants in learning to write reflectively.

Outcomes of Portfolio Development at TCD

At the individual level, participants who have completed the programme have noted a variety of unexpected outcomes. Although not an intended outcome, several participants have been nominated for Provost Teaching Awards and two have actually won them since completing the programme ('the programme was very influential in this'; 'it helped enormously in my application'.) Others have used their teaching philosophy statements in applying for promotions and have commented on how discussion of educational theory, curriculum design, assessment and teaching methodologies has helped them in this process.

Many participants comment that participation in the programme has increased their confidence in their approach to teaching. Others focus on how the programme has stimulated development of their teaching in specific areas:

- *I now write learning outcomes for every lecture.*
- *I consider the whole design of the courses I teach—from aims to teaching strategies and assessment methods.*
- *I now seek feedback from my peers and students and value others evaluating my teaching.*


It is particularly warming when participants remark that they have developed as reflective practitioners; that they will continue to inquire into their teaching; and that they will strive to better balance their teaching and research.

At an institutional level, the most valuable unexpected outcome has been the evolution of a dynamic, vibrant portfolio community of practice (Wenger 1998). Keen to encourage this, CAPSL provides regular opportunities for those interested to meet and continue professional dialogue not just on reflective teaching portfolios but on many aspects of learning and teaching. Recently, the community met to discuss future developments and proposed the following:

- a series of lunchtime mini-presentations to discuss latest portfolio entries or teaching philosophy statements
- research on ways to encourage publishing about teaching
- presentation of papers spearheading scholarship of teaching
- presentation of papers at conferences
- creation of a booklet of portfolio entries/experiences
- creation of a database of portfolio entries and teaching philosophy statements.

Conclusions and Plans for Future Portfolio Development

Professional development in the area of learning and teaching may take many forms. In the case of CAPSL and TCD, it may mean:

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- becoming an active player in the evolving reflective teaching portfolio community of practice
 - becoming a mentor to future reflective teaching portfolio cohorts or attending learning and teaching workshops
 - joining a reading circle or attending a teaching collaborative session
 - presenting a topic for discussion or a paper on an aspect of learning and teaching
 - developing one's reading on learning and teaching, educational theory or instructional practice
 - attending an educational conference, undertaking educational research within the classroom or contributing to literature in the scholarship of teaching.

The reflective teaching portfolio is often just the first step in a valuable and rewarding process supported by CAPSL at TCD.

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¹ The programme was administered by Mr. Robert Kennelly who, along with Ciara O'Farrell, supported Nona Lyons in facilitating the programme, pp34-37.