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Shaping the Reflective Portfolio: A Philosophical Look at the Mentoring Role

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The skills needed for one-on-one consulting with composition students transfer well into the role of portfolio mentor. Mentors must respect the integrity of the person, the process, and the product as they help faculty develop reflective portfolios, each governed by a controlling idea. Such portfolios ideally should be shared with a wider community.

Recently I have come to appreciate, in a different context, the depth of the skills I've developed over the years as a composition teacher, particularly the one-on-one coaching skills essential for effective individual student conferences. Students appear at my door clutching drafts of compositions, and in conference together we shape and reshape a piece of writing into a coherent whole. Initially I skim the paper to gain a holistic view of its elements, sometimes stopping to ask clarifying questions. After my rapid review, we mutually explore the student's intent and purpose, which often emerge for the first time during this discussion. Only then can we work with the overall design and structure, looking at such things as rearranging paragraphs, adding transitions, and inserting concrete, creative examples. Depending on the student, we move to the micro level, looking for sentences we can rework, generalizing all the while to solid principles of composition such as using active voice or putting key words in key places. Finally, we turn our attention to surface elements—grammar and punctuation—looking for repeated problems, not isolated errors, so that I can help the student uncover misconceptions and learn skills that will extend beyond this single document.

My approach throughout the conference is to draw the student out by asking questions such as, Why did you choose that sentence to focus the paper? Could you give the reader an example here? What other evidence did you consider? Could paragraph six be omitted or possibly moved to

your concluding section? Often my questions are leading ones, prompting the student to see an obvious (to me) improvement. More often they are genuine efforts to understand the motives, the logic, and sometimes the passionate convictions behind the words.

Do students leave my office with a sense of exhilaration about our mutual exchanges and with a sense of ownership and pride in a well-crafted piece of writing? Do they find meaningful the interactive process and the reshaped product they carry away? More significantly, will our collegial endeavors inspire them to devote more time and thought to strengthening their work-in-progress? The answers depends, of course, on the individual student, the nature of the assignment, and the topic selected. Compositions based on what has come to be called “authentic learning,” learning based on real-world problems of genuine concern to the writer, often do prompt these strong emotions. Sadly, however, in too many cases—despite my own enthusiasm, encouragement, and best efforts—I fear that the conference may have been a painful ordeal and that the reshaped draft may be merely another hurdle before students leap through the portals of English 101 into a more congenial world where they “won’t have to write anymore.”

I do not have these misgivings when I work with faculty to create teaching portfolios. As a portfolio mentor at my own institution and on other campuses, I have come to appreciate the teaching portfolio’s power both to document and to shape faculty experience. I have also developed an evolving view of what I call “the reflective portfolio” and of the portfolio mentor’s role in helping to craft the final product. Let me begin with the document itself.

Virtually everyone associated with the growing portfolio movement in this country emphasizes its reflective nature. In reality, time constraints, a lack of clear models, or a faculty member’s predisposition to “get the job done and move on” have led to a number of portfolios that are not far removed from the heavy boxes of supporting materials kicked over thresholds for promotion and tenure reviews. Perhaps the final documents are better organized, but too often they remain undifferentiated pieces of paper seasoned with a sprinkling of commentary. A reflective portfolio, on the other hand, is carefully shaped with the help of a perceptive, other-directed mentor.

What form does a reflective portfolio take? At first glance, it looks like any other teaching portfolio. Typically housed in a loose-leaf binder, the reflective portfolio is introduced by a title page and organized by a table of contents. Next are 5 to 10 pages of commentary prepared specifically for the portfolio, followed by tabbed and indexed appendixes containing supporting documents (see appendix).

But the reflective portfolio has some key differences. For one thing, like a unified composition, it is governed by a “controlling idea.” This idea—and it may be many-faceted—evolves in the statement of teaching philosophy suggested by virtually all portfolio advocates. Too often such philosophy statements focus on the “what,” not the “why” (e.g., “To build critical thinking skills, I do the following . . . ; to strengthen writing skills, I do the following . . .”). The “why” is there, but it is subordinated.

The reflective portfolio seeks to arrive at the guiding principles that shape not only teaching, but also, in many cases, shape faculty lives. For example, a biologist with a rich, complex academic life realized, upon reflection, that in all his professional work—teaching undergraduates, mentoring graduate students, reaching out to the local community, and consulting in tropical countries to save the rain forests—he had one essential goal: to help people learn to think like scientists. This underlying passion—because it could make a difference in so many ways—shaped his multifaceted life’s work. He phrased these thoughts in his introductory philosophy statement with the following words:

In teaching biology, whether it be for undergraduates, graduate students, or other professionals, it is essential that concepts and facts be examined from an empirical perspective. I am interested in developing students who are able to think as scientists think, rather than training students to define terms, recite biochemical pathways, and identify organs and tissues. (Kirby, 1994)

Another example is an assistant professor in the School of Criminal Justice who focused her discussion of her undergraduate class as follows:

I believe that my undergraduate course should reflect the general goals of the liberal arts curriculum. By that, I mean that it should encourage students to be critical thinkers, that it should help them to understand issues facing society in ways that go beyond their personal experiences or opinions, that it should provide them with tools for making decisions, that it should help them “learn how to learn,” and that it should prepare them to express their views effectively, with a particular emphasis on the use of empirical evidence. (Waring, 1994)

As a third example, an adjunct faculty member who teaches information systems management allowed his workplace knowledge to inform his portfolio by using an extended analogy comparing education to business:

The classroom is like a business. . . . This analogy frames my view of the classroom and underpins my teaching philosophy.

All activities and events in the classroom revolve around providing service to the students—my customers. . . . To this end I follow a basic set of rules and standards when teaching students and operating the business of the classroom . . . [with] the following business principles:

- **Contract** . . . establishes classroom service levels and forms student expectations.
- **Customer** . . . creates the need for service and determines the quality level.
- **Process** . . . combines learning and teaching and delivers the product to the student.
- **Goals** . . . result in continuous learning improvement to achieve high levels of student satisfaction. (Braccia, 1994)

Because the reflective portfolio is shaped by a controlling idea, to borrow an old cliché, the tail doesn't wag the dog. Too often the appendixes—the supporting documents—dominate portfolio creation. Using this approach, faculty focus on a shopping list of possible portfolio items and determine which ones are most accessible. An emphasis on the “what” rather than the “why” may result in a superficial compilation of unrelated documents. The quest for the “artifacts of teaching” may resemble not a purposeful archaeological dig, governed by a strategic plan and underlying premises, but a frenetic search through dusty file cabinets or archived computer databases for whatever emerges.

This is not to suggest that it is unnecessary to conduct a meaningful, realistic assessment of what might be included in a portfolio and what is available. Such a review is indeed a critically important step. But it should not be the central step: No one wants to suggest that faculty build their teaching philosophy on the contents of their files. Ideally, first comes reflection and then selection.

What is selected depends in part on the controlling idea, the availability of supporting materials, the nature and purpose of the portfolio, the discipline, and the personality and teaching proclivities of the faculty member. In general, three sections of the reflective commentary (the “heart” of the portfolio) need not be directly related to individual, specific appendixes. These are the statement of teaching responsibilities that provides the context for the portfolio, the teaching philosophy statement that informs the whole, and the speculation on future plans that offers meaning and value.

The other sections of the reflective commentary should amplify, clarify, and justify the individual appendixes they reference. For example, a

psychology faculty member whose controlling idea was a belief in learning as an active process discussed her syllabus in these terms:

As the sample syllabus in Appendix C illustrates, I always spell out course objectives, methods of evaluation, attendance and participation policies, and a tentative calendar. These details serve to organize my courses and ensure that I have communicated my expectations. For example, since I value active learning and see it as essential to improving student performance, I cite participation on my syllabus as a class requirement. The syllabus is given to students on the first day of class. In fact, the students' first group activity is to discuss the syllabus and come up with at least one question. This first assignment not only breaks the ice, but helps students understand what is expected. Furthermore, it leads to a discussion of the methods—group work and lectures—I use to structure the class. (Ahsani, 1994)

Rather than offer a separate, isolated commentary for each appendix, many faculty simply weave references to appendixes within unified essays. This approach often strengthens coherence. For instance, Di Palma (1994), in a thoughtful essay on decisions she made while planning an introductory course in social work and social welfare, discussed three things that were illustrated by corresponding appendixes: (a) her reasons for designing a student data sheet; (b) the value, despite the labor involved, of developing study guides for each chapter of the textbook; and (c) the intended small-group-centered use of a case study on the generalist casework model.

Most faculty include in appendixes supporting documents such as syllabi, student evaluations, peer reviews, sample examinations or graded student papers, and relevant letters. Nonprint materials also can be featured. Many teaching portfolio advocates recommend a balance of three products: (a) those, such as syllabi, created by the faculty member; (b) material from others, particularly students (course evaluations) and academic colleagues (classroom observation reports); and (c) evidence of good teaching, such as students' success in advanced education or on the job.

As a mentor, I encourage faculty to organize their appendixes with two ideas in mind: lucidity and integrity. The appendixes must be of manageable size if they are to be read, and they must be clear to any potential reader, especially those outside of the department or the discipline. By integrity, I mean that certain key items, such as syllabi and student evaluations, are expected: To omit them would be to compromise the validity of the overall portfolio. Furthermore, these key sup-

porting documents must be presented systematically. They must reflect a discernible pattern such as all evaluations for one course for the past three years or all syllabi for all courses taught for the past two years.

The reflective commentary in the heart of the portfolio likewise should aim for lucidity and integrity, but it must also focus selectively, rather than attempt to cover everything with a wide-angle lens. For example, an appendix might include 15 summary sheets of student course evaluations, but the reflective commentary on these evaluations by a mythical professor might discuss only one course:

Although my evaluations in Course X are slightly below institutional norms, this may be explained by William Cashin's research indicating that students in large, required classes—particularly the quantifiably demanding ones such as Introduction to Statistics—tend to give lower ratings to those teachers than they do to teachers of small, elective courses. Nonetheless, I take student ratings seriously, and the data from Course X led to the following specific insights into my teaching strategies and evaluative methods: . . .

The mentor's role is to help shape these reflections, to encourage the faculty member both to discover and to create meaning. I schedule regular meetings with set agendas so that the portfolios can develop progressively, like compositions, as well as reflectively. I like to respond to drafts spontaneously, but other mentors might prefer time to look them over before a meeting. There is no ideal time frame for portfolio development, but I have found that concentrated commitment over a period of about three weeks works better than shorter periods that are too intense or longer periods during which inspiration and a sense of urgency are lost.

To respect the integrity of the person, the process, and the final product, I try to refrain from imposing my own assumptions, purpose, form, or style, no matter how tempting it might be to turn clumsy but honest prose into sparkling but artificial poetry. I always ask faculty members what their expectations are for my role and how much direct assistance they desire. Most faculty, for example, welcome in-depth editing, but others may view it as intrusive. Those preferences are respected. My mentoring role is that of a guide, not a director: The destination belongs to my faculty colleague.

Faculty sometimes worry that a "glitzy" portfolio will obscure poor teaching, causing a gifted teacher with less polished presentation skills to suffer by comparison. In practice this does not occur. I assure faculty members that their portfolio can be strengthened by coaching, but emphasize that it should remain essentially their own. Often faculty from different disciplines creatively focus portfolios through the lens of their

academic training. For example, an accountant (Cantor, 1994) created an insightful, easy-to-read analysis of changes he had implemented in his auditing and taxation courses. His reflective analysis was neatly organized, ledger-style, under three columns labeled Objectives, Actions, and Results. The following is an example:

Student Test Taking Skills

Objectives	Actions	Results
Improve student test taking skills. Students appear to have difficulty adjusting to multiple-choice and other objective accounting questions of the type given on the CPA examination.	The week before an examination, students are given a problem packet with over 75 sample multiple choice and other objective type questions. Roughly 10-20% of the exam problems come from problems in this packet. Quizzes also have objective questions. Some of these questions are also repeated on the examination. Finally, all objective questions in the text are assigned as homework, and test taking techniques are incorporated into homework review.	Examination scores have increased. Combining quizzes and homework reviews has allowed time to teach test taking techniques.

Several other objectives analyzed in the table were (a) to increase student preparation for class; (b) to improve student writing skills; and (c) to learn more about the students, including their expectations from the class and their career goals.

Because such reflection deserves a wider audience, I broaden the sphere of community whenever possible. For instance, I encourage faculty to share their developing portfolios with faculty colleagues and others. Multiple readers, inside and outside the discipline, can offer constructive feedback. Having a nonacademic read and respond to a teaching portfolio is a good test of its clarity. If an insurance agent or a librarian can understand and appreciate the intricacies of the teaching profession through their next-door neighbor's portfolio, then the accomplishments of the faculty member have been well communicated. I also suggest that faculty work in reciprocal pairs, visiting one another's classes and reviewing each other's teaching materials. When these observations are committed to paper, they can enrich both portfolios.

I love to mentor several faculty members during the same time period because they are often struggling with the same concerns and I can share evolving ideas from each advisee. We can also meet as a group to discuss mutual efforts and to offer encouragement, support, and affirmation. Ideally these committed faculty themselves will become mentors after their portfolios have reached the first plateau of completion (a teaching portfolio, like a professor, should never be a finished product); thus, the portfolio process can come full circle.

Conclusion

Few professional experiences have had more significance for me than these intense, mutually rewarding mentoring relationships. I jokingly say that together—as we shape the controlling idea, work and rework the organizational structure, and even polish the individual sentences—we are creating a “mini-masterpiece.” The faculty members, unlike most of my composition students, feel as positive about the experience as I do. The difference lies in the authenticity of the experience. Students rarely feel a deep-rooted commitment toward a required composition. The faculty members, on the other hand, are engaged in truly authentic learning. By creating a reflective teaching portfolio, they are capturing for themselves and others the meaning behind a significant part of their professional lives.

References

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Appendix

Teaching Portfolio Format

Title Page

Table of Contents

Reflective Heart

with

- (a) commentary not necessarily linked to appendixes, such as a statement of teaching responsibilities, a teaching philosophy statement, and a discussion of future goals and plans;
- (b) commentary linked to each supporting appendix containing material such as syllabi, student evaluations, student work samples, or classroom observations.

List of Appendixes (annotated)

Tabbed Appendixes containing supporting documents

Special thanks go to my friends Peter Seldin and Lynn Wild; to eight gifted, reflective faculty at Rutgers University, Newark Campus; and to myriads of dedicated faculty at the University of Maryland University College.

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