



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

Hotel D, 24 East Range (804) 982-2815 trc-uva@virginia.edu <http://www.virginia.edu/~trc/>

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Presenting Our Work as Teachers: Finding the 'Tune' with a Teaching Portfolio

by Robert F. Bruner, Distinguished Professor of Business Administration and Executive Director of the Batten Institute,
Darden Graduate School of Business Administration

Mark Twain barely contained his use of profanity, a problem his wife abhorred and sought to cure. One evening, he and she were dressing for a formal dinner when a button popped off his shirt. He launched a tirade against buttons, formal shirts, and evening wear. After a few minutes, the profanity subsided. Twain's wife decided to use the moment to remind her husband to govern his language. Calmly, and in a flat voice, she repeated, word for word, the entire tirade. Twain replied, "My dear, you have the words, but you don't have the tune."

Much the same could be said of the way scholars describe their teaching. The typical curriculum vitae emphasizes written work over teaching. Promotion portfolios usually consist of a solid discussion of the candidate's intellectual contribution as a researcher, combined with a simple list of courses taught and perhaps some teaching ratings. The presentation has some words about teaching, but none of the music: choices made in course design; risks taken; successes (or learnings from failures); teaching philosophy and style; interpretation of the teaching ratings; growth as a teacher and plans for continued professional development. Absent these, the presentation of one's teaching is like the language of Twain's wife, flat and tuneless.

That teaching should be the hidden dimension in a summary of professional work is curious. In virtually all business schools the quality of teaching is a priority. Pressure from students, recruiters, donors, and among the schools themselves has elevated teaching competence to a level higher than ever. In addition, teaching in all its manifestations absorbs an enormous part of professional time and energy. To ignore it is to deny a large chunk of one's professional life. Ultimately, this kind of denial can create a self-fulfilling prophecy; if one's teaching isn't important enough to discuss richly, it can wither.

Finding the tune in teaching should be a matter for both

individual candidates and institutions. An excellent vehicle for this is the teaching portfolio, a 5-10 page document that, along with appendices and supplements, describes the teaching dimension of one's professional work. Specifically, it surveys teaching assignments, philosophy, style, accomplishments, innovations, and evidence of teaching effectiveness. Rather like the professional portfolio of an artist, composer or writer, the teaching portfolio shows the person's best work, and perhaps argues for better work to come. A note, Introduction to "The Teaching Portfolio," discusses the concept of the portfolio and offers some resources for further consideration: http://papers.ssrn.com/paper.taf?abstract_id=230099. The TRC also maintains a good library of reference materials on the teaching portfolio concept.

The teaching portfolio can improve the way scholars present the teaching component of their professional work. Here are some possibilities for its uses:

- ❖ Candidates for employment, tenure, and promotion could prepare a teaching portfolio as part of the presentation of their work. This is a nontrivial exercise and will take perhaps 20 hours to complete. Take time to invite suggestions from mentors and colleagues outside your area.
- ❖ Deans could incorporate teaching portfolios into their faculty development efforts. Writing the portfolio stimulates self-evaluation and reflection, the foundation of all teaching improvement. It affords an excellent opportunity to discuss an instructor's ongoing development as well as the commitments and resources needed. Once created, the portfolio is easily updated.
- ❖ Departments could create a mechanism, like an annual workshop, through which participants can band together and create their portfolios in a confined space of time. In time, these workshops can grow into conversations about development of teachers. U.Va. offers an annual workshop through the TRC, which I recommend highly—it will be offered next May 15-24, 2001. The TRC will begin considering applications March 1, 2001.
- ❖ Teaching portfolios can become exemplars for new (and not-so-new) instructors. Portfolios developed through past TRC workshops are available for review at Hotel D, 24 East Range.

- ❖ Tenure and promotion committees could counsel candidates toward a fuller presentation of their teaching work through the portfolio concept. The reality is that most promotion portfolios are highly idiosyncratic, perhaps justly so. But with some examples and a few words of guidance, the submission will be enriched considerably, usually to the candidate's benefit.
- ❖ Senior faculty could prepare teaching portfolios both as a legacy to the department ("Here's what worked for me; you might try this, too") and as an example of how richly one can talk about teaching activities. From personal experience I can report that though it seemed awkward and time-consuming at first, developing a portfolio crystallized some important insights for me. I'm glad I did it.

The benefits of all this effort are better decisions about employment, promotion and tenure, better faculty development, better discourse within a faculty about teaching, and finally, greater personal clarity about one's strengths and goals. All of this has to do with finding the tune, not just the words, of teaching.

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