

TEACHING CONCERNS

Encouraging Scholarly Practice for Web-Savvy Students

Deandra Little, *TRC Faculty Consultant, English*

"[A]s the Internet has expanded over the years, many college students turn to the Web not simply for quick, meaningless information but as the starting point for serious academic research. My peers and I use computers for nearly every aspect of our daily lives."

~Carie Windham, "Getting Past Google"

As Carie Windham's remarks suggest, the majority of today's students are "digital natives," who cannot remember a time before computers and who instinctively turn to digital media for answers to a wide range of questions. To say that today's students are comfortable using the Web seems both self-evident and an understatement. Likely, you've found, as I have, that students increasingly interject information found on the Internet into classroom discussions or as sources for their independent research projects. U.Va. students, like Windham, often turn to the Web "as the starting point for serious academic research," expecting to learn and to conduct research using digitized information.

Their reliance on technology can have very positive outcomes—students can easily satisfy their own curiosity to find out more about a class topic or author, and they can enrich class discussion by sharing this with their peers. The problem arises when students, who appear quite savvy at locating information, don't after all know how to find reliable sources or how to evaluate the sources they do find on the Internet. Once memorized, misinformation can be difficult to erase.

Listening to my students relate what they have gleaned from the Web for class or for a paper made me wonder: Just how adept are today's students at finding the best information or at evaluating the reliability of the information they find? Do they primarily "google" the topic, or do they take the time to visit scholarly databases or archives that will point them to academic journals?

Recent research on information literacy suggests that undergraduates are not as "net savvy" as you might anticipate, given their reliance on computers. When searching for information, students typically rely on general search engines (Google, Altavista), search directories (Yahoo!) or meta-search engines (Dogpile, Metacrawler), which perform paradoxically extensive yet superficial web searches. Moreover, studies of web-searching patterns show that typical web users tend to type in only a small number of terms per query (between two and three on average), to select from the first page or two of results, and to end the search after one or two attempts to find relevant information.¹ The preliminary findings of a recent Educational Testing Service (ETS) survey suggests that over half of the students were able to identify "reasonably relevant materials" when searching a database of journal articles, but that students were "generally poor at identifying biased Web content" (Foster 2006).

(continued on page 2)

UNIVERSITY
of VIRGINIA

TEACHING RESOURCE CENTER

*Promoting professional excellence for
faculty and graduate students*

<http://trc.virginia.edu>
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SPRING 2007

Programs & Services

To schedule any of the services described below, please contact the TRC a minimum of one week ahead of time. More information about each service can be found on the TRC website (<http://trc.virginia.edu>).

INDIVIDUAL CONSULTATION

Trained TRC staff members can consult with you individually about any aspect of your teaching. Typical activities include observing your classroom teaching, analyzing student evaluations, discussing new course design or existing course redesign, and considering new teaching techniques. All consultations are confidential and tailored to your needs.

TEACHING ANALYSIS POLL (TAP)

Find out what the majority of your students think helps them learn in your course. Time commitment: 25-30 minutes of class time, 30 minutes consultation time. Except in special circumstances, the TRC conducts TAPs only between the fourth and tenth weeks of the semester.

VIDEOTAPING

Videotape usually makes it easier to analyze your own teaching since you can see your class from an objective point of view. During the 60-minute discussion about the class videotape, a TRC consultant will help you see what works and how to make desired improvements.

TEACHING TIPS ON-LINE

Explore the TRC's collection of teaching essays and teaching tips via our easy-to-browse Teaching Tips page, or browse the TRC library holdings on-line using the search feature. In either place you can find strategies to engage your students, learn about assessment techniques, get some advice to spruce up your lecturing, or simply discover new teaching ideas.

My experience

In my own courses, my first response to students' over-reliance on the Web was an attempt to regulate their use of it. To encourage greater use of print sources from the library, I limited the number of web-based sources allowed in a bibliography. As the number of academic journals available on-line continued to multiply, I found students were confused about what counts as a "print" source and what as a "web" source. This confusion, coupled with repeated attempts to convince skeptical students that they could write a research paper that relied on only two websites, made me reconsider how I approach this assignment.

Clearly, at issue is not *whether* students will continue to use the Web but *how* they use it. Without a supporting instructional framework, my stipulations produced compliance rather than any real understanding of what constitutes a good primary or secondary source in my discipline (they also served to convince the students that I matriculated during the Dark Ages). To remedy this, I changed my approach and developed two assignments to help students more effectively search, retrieve, and critically engage with information they find on the Web.

How I responded

The first assignment focuses on searching the web for relevant, scholarly sources. For each research paper or project they write, students are responsible for keeping a web-usage log.² As students locate a source on the Web, they record in their log such information as the date, the site name and author (if known), relevant content, and the process they used to locate it. By including the final step, students make their searching habits more visible to themselves and to me. At that point, I can help them fine-tune the process by directing them to more specialized search tools or archives, by working with my department's subject librarian to create a research guide handout for my class, or by arranging for a librarian to talk to my class about fruitful searching techniques for on-line research databases. I can't stress enough how helpful the library has been in helping instruct the students how to generate smart, deep searches of relevant material.³

Another benefit of the log is that it can foster classroom conversations about how and where to locate research materials in my discipline and how to determine whether a primary or secondary source is reliable or

significant. These conversations provide a clear transition to the next assignment, which prompts students to carefully evaluate the sources they find. For it, I ask students to analyze at least two of the web-based sources they are considering for their research papers by answering the questions located in the table on page 3. Then we spend part of the next class period talking generally about what they discovered. You could combine the homework assignment and discussion to dissect specific examples of good and bad websites together as a class. Personally, I like for the students to use the assignment to critique sources they are considering for their bibliographies. The follow-up discussion allows us to share insights that might seem evident, but aren't always to my students—for example, that seemingly reliable websites may perpetuate common myths or subtle bias, that even reputable sources or professional websites can provide dated information, or that the best source might not be available as an on-line pdf document but might require a trip to the library.

As I've assigned the log and the critique with greater regularity, my opinion of students' web use has changed. Rather than trying to thwart students' deeply engrained custom of turning to the Web as the source for all answers, I've instead started trying to help them ask the right questions and to think critically about what they find there. Assuming that undergraduates do depend on computers for "nearly every aspect of [their] daily lives," I hope to encourage them to do so more thoughtfully and more deliberately so as to enrich rather than stifle their own scholarship.

¹ From a study by Amanda Spink, "Web Search: Emerging Patterns," *Library Trends*, 52, no. 2 (2003). (Quoted in Hirsh and Prescott)

² The on-line workshop on the University of Minnesota's Center for Teaching and Learning webpage has two pages of links which explore related issues. See especially, "Beyond Google" (<http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/tutorials/savvy/beyond/html>) and "Sample Assignments" (<http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/tutorials/savvy/sample.html>).

³ You can contact your department's subject librarian or Esther Onega, the Head of Humanities and Social Sciences Instruction and Outreach, for more information on how they can help develop materials specific to your course.

Works Cited:

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- Windham, Carie. "Getting Past Google: Perspectives on Information Literacy from the Millennial Mind." Edited by Diana G. Oblinger. EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative White Paper. (September 2006)
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Critique of Web Sources: How Do You Know Which Information to Trust?

For any two of the websites you are considering as a source of information for your research project, please answer the following questions:

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Authority: | Who is the author? What are the author's credentials and reputation? Is the author, publisher, or association reputable? |
| Objectivity: | Are the author's goals explicitly stated? Does the author demonstrate a particular bias? Does the information appear valid and well researched? |
| Quality: | Is the information well-organized, accurate, and without typographical errors? Are the graphics (images, tables, charts, diagrams) clear and appropriate? Is this a scholarly or a popular journal? |
| Coverage: | Does the work update other sources? Does it substantiate other arguments you've read or does it add new information? |
| Currency: | When was it published? Does your topic require current information? Has the source been revised, updated, or expanded in a more recent addition? |
| Relevance: | Does the work address your research question or meet the requirements of your assignment? Is the content appropriate for your research topic or assignment? |

* Adapted from the University of Oregon Libraries, "Critical Evaluation of Information Sources: Or, But Is It Credible?" <http://libweb.uoregon.edu/guides/findarticles/credibility.html> (accessed December 5, 2006)

See also :

"Evaluating Web Pages for Use in Research," a Teaching Tip on the TRC website.

Teaching Resource Center

Full-time staff

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Position Announcement: Graduate Student Associate

The Teaching Resource Center employs several Graduate Student Associates (GSAs) to help promote excellence in teaching at the University of Virginia. The GSAs help develop and manage various programs, including the August and January Teaching Workshops, departmental and interdisciplinary workshops and discussion groups, and the ITA Training Program. Chief among the GSAs' responsibilities are individual consultations with other TAs. Routinely, Associates observe or videotape the classrooms of TAs at their request and then discuss with them ways to enhance their teaching strengths and to improve any weak areas.

Strong candidates for the position typically have teaching experience at U.Va., excellent teaching skills, an interest in teaching, personal initiative, and effective interpersonal communication skills. GSAs may be specialists in any discipline, and we attempt to employ staff members from a variety of departments and schools.

Applications may be submitted at any time for future consideration; the deadline for the coming academic year is April 13, 2007. For more information on how to apply, or to read three former Graduate Student Associates' descriptions of their experiences, click the "Graduate Student Associates" link on the Staff page of the TRC website.

Using Mid-Semester Evaluations to Encourage Active Learning

Carey Sargent, former TRC Graduate Student Associate, Department of Sociology

In recent years, there has been a move toward "democratic classrooms," in which students lead discussion, provide input about course design, and independently choose project topics. These practices have become institutionalized at U.Va. in the form of TA-led discussion sessions and labs, Summer Session and January Term, upper-level seminars and even in large lecture courses. Yet while our teaching practices aim to empower students and shape them as active learners, the standard templates for final course evaluations suggest a more passive role for students. In many standardized evaluations, students are encouraged to express general sentiments and reactions without being given specific tools to evaluate the learning environments they help to create. Rather than be the focus of a conversation or collective effort to modify the course, final evaluations serve as a closed statement to which instructors may not directly respond.

By using mid-semester evaluations, instructors can provide students with the tools to reflect on their own contributions, their peers' contributions, and the pedagogical values of the instructor. This early conversation not only makes students aware of their responsibilities in the course, but also allows instructors to address issues of concern before the students have left the classroom for good. In this article, I offer one approach to constructing mid-term evaluations that may be used to generate conversation about everyone's role in meeting the aims and objectives of the course.

The first question you might have is why any instructor would want to discuss the results of evaluations with students—some of the information is misdirected and hurtful, or accurate but embarrassing, or just plain irrelevant. However, I have found that using mid-semester evaluations and reporting the results back to students has several benefits beyond empowering students to be responsible for their learning. First and perhaps most obviously, it gives me a chance to hear how things are going and provide insight into issues that already concern me, such as a lack of class dialogue or poor performance on assignments. Next, it allows me an appropriate space to rearticulate my pedagogical style and course objectives to students who now have a deeper sense of what the course is about than they did on the first day (if they were even there). Finally, by modeling reflection on teaching with students, I can provide them with the tools they need to write constructive final evaluations.

Once ready to go ahead with mid-term evaluations, it's important to consider what kinds of information will be most helpful to your objectives. I structure student responses in ways that bring out constructive criticism and minimize such irrelevant comments as their time preferences, my wardrobe, or assessments of the course's "fun factor." By structuring questions around students' learning processes, I give them a framework to draw upon when they are asked more open-ended questions about the course in the future. To this end, I write four questions on the board and have students respond on their own paper:¹

1. What knowledge and experience have you contributed to this course?
2. How have your peers aided your learning?
3. How has the instructor and/or course materials aided your learning?
4. Has anything been hindering your learning?

When I compile the responses to these questions, I like to organize the comments into three categories:

1. Things that are going well
2. Things that we can work on
3. Things we can't change

I report this information back to students in the next class at either the beginning or the end, depending upon our activities that day. I convey the results verbally and as briefly as possible (no more than five minutes) because anything more formal or lengthy is tiresome for us all.

Under “things that are going well,” I give credit to myself and to the students in turn. Students seem to be the least interested in this category, so I try to focus it on issues that may be less obvious or things that I am particularly pleased about.

For the category of “things to work on,” I specify a few things for students to work on, in response to their honest admissions about not completing assignments or being too tired to participate, and so on. I then list a few things that I will work on, often related to course materials, feedback on student work or organization. In this category, I try to focus on one or two of the most pressing and most doable things so that it is possible to follow through. I sometimes tell them that I will consider other issues in future courses. This response shows students that they and you are often already well aware of problem areas. It also creates a “contract” of sorts, making everyone in the class work towards resolving these issues.

Finally, the “things we can’t change” category allows me to talk about what I won’t sacrifice for pedagogical reasons or for department or curricular requirements (I once had to remind students that I assign sociology readings exclusively because it was a sociology class!). This category is also a repository for silly or unhelpful comments, such as, for instance, to wear a watch, to hold class later in the day, or to “force students to talk.” While you would lose their attention by listing everything here, the strategic and humorous use of a couple of these comments can be an eye-opening experience for students.

Overall, I have found this dialogue not only helps me to address problems and miscommunication early on, but it also helps many students to gain insight into how to convey constructive criticism. It helps students become more reflexive about their role in making the course a success. And finally, it can make final evaluations more useful to our efforts at improving teaching at the University.

¹ You may prefer to create a shorter, more general set of questions, such as those used in the Teaching Resource Center’s Teaching Analysis Poll: “In this course, what aids your learning?” and “In this course, what hinders your learning?” Often students will remark on themselves and their peers, as well.

2006-07 Graduate Student Associates



A Ph.D. candidate in Religion and Culture, **Brantley Craig** is interested in the retelling of stories as both a literary and religious practice. Brantley has taught courses on religion and literature, C. S. Lewis, and the American South. He enjoys making people think and making people laugh—in whichever order is more appropriate at the time—and helping people find new ways of looking at or questioning texts, practices and ideas. Brantley spends his free time sampling local food and wine with his wife Sarah, walking with their dog Friday, and planning his next beach vacation.



Dan Muth is a Ph.D. candidate in the Environmental Sciences and researches the land-atmosphere interactions influencing radiation budgets, soil biogeochemistry, and ecosystem exchange of CO₂ and water vapor. He is interested in exploring interdisciplinary approaches to solving environmental problems and has taught classes in ecology, geology, and law here at the University of Virginia. Beyond these credentials, he dabbles in music, writing, adventuring, pondering, sporting, and silliness. Dan prefers to approach life with a smile on his face, approach people as singularly unique and interesting, and approach education as a torch that lights the way.

Deadlines!

Please note that several deadlines occur early in the spring semester. Unless otherwise noted, for more information, visit <http://trc.virginia.edu> or contact the TRC at 982-2815 or trc-uva@virginia.edu.

OUTSTANDING FACULTY AND GTA TEACHING AWARDS and CAVALIERS’ DISTINGUISHED TEACHING PROFESSORSHIP

Deadline: Monday, February 5, 2007. The Provost’s Office and the Teaching Resource Center are proud to administer this program of a dozen faculty teaching awards, 28 school/department-wide Graduate Teaching Assistant awards, and four All-University GTA teaching awards.

U.Va. FACULTY SENATE DISSERTATION-YEAR FELLOWSHIPS 2007-2008

Deadline: Friday, February 2, 2007. Five fellowships of approximately \$25,000 (to cover tuition, fees, health insurance, and stipend) will be awarded to graduate students from across the University for their final year of doctoral work. These fellowships will reward graduate students who have taught extraordinarily well at U.Va. while also maintaining a record of research excellence in their discipline. To find out more visit the Faculty Senate website at www.virginia.edu/facultysenate. Questions about the application process should be directed to one of the co-chairs, Deborah Roach, Biology (droach@virginia.edu) or Deandra Little, TRC (dllittle@virginia.edu).

UNIVERSITY TEACHING FELLOWSHIPS

Deadline: Monday, March 12, 2007. With summer grants of \$7,000 and ongoing, interdisciplinary discussions, the TRC University Teaching Fellows Program aims to help our most intellectually sound and successful junior faculty members develop into exceptionally fine teachers.

GRADUATE STUDENT ASSOCIATESHIPS

Deadline: Friday, April 13, 2007. Graduate Student Associates are essential to the operation of the TRC. See the position announcement on page 4.

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(Deadlines continued)

TOMORROW'S

PROFESSOR TODAY

Applications considered beginning Monday, May 21, 2007. Cosponsored by the Office of the Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and the Graduate School of Engineering, Tomorrow's Professor Today is a certificate-bearing program open to a limited number of graduate and postdoctoral students considering an academic career. Program description at <http://trc.virginia.edu/Programs/TPT>

EXCELLENCE IN DIVERSITY FELLOWSHIPS

Deadline: early June 2007. The TRC Excellence in Diversity Fellowship Program supports first-year tenure track faculty in developing productive long-term careers at U.Va. The Program fosters ongoing interdisciplinary discussions between Fellows and senior colleagues and offers each Fellow a \$1,000 grant for professional development. Senior faculty and chairs are encouraged to invite candidates to apply. Program description at <http://trc.virginia.edu/Programs/EDF>

Workshops!

Refreshments are served at all TRC workshops. For more detail on these and to find more recently scheduled workshops, see "Workshops" on the TRC website or contact the TRC at 982-2815 or trc-uva@virginia.edu.

TEACHING SMALL SEMINARS:

Making it Informative, Interactive, and Fun for Both the Students and You

Dennis Proffitt, *Commonwealth Professor of Psychology*

Thursday, February 8, 10:00-11:30 am, Newcomb Hall Room 481

In Spring 2004, I taught the most successful advanced undergraduate seminar of my career. In this teaching workshop, I will talk about what worked and why, including the following topics:

- Selecting the topics to be covered, books, and readings
- Structuring student assignments and class presentations
- Nurturing conversation and debate during class
- Writing exams
- Giving students the opportunity to teach me something

The seminar was titled, "Light, Life, and Vision." It was also frequently called, "The Joy of Finding Stuff Out."

This workshop is open to the entire University community, both faculty and graduate students. *Please pre-register on the TRC website or by calling the TRC. Sponsored by the TRC University Teaching Fellows Program.*

UNPACKING A TEXT

Kate Burke, *Associate Professor of Drama; Past President Voice and Speech Trainers Association, Inc. (VASTA)*

Monday, February 19, 2:00-4:00 pm, Newcomb Hall South Meeting Room

At this workshop, faculty and graduate student participants will learn how to help students respond more actively and immediately to an unfamiliar text by quickly discovering its spoken rhythm. Using group readings of a text as a point of departure, participants will try out various text-exploration techniques to enter the reading through several "doors" and from different points of view. Through such techniques, the expert—in our case, the teacher—can give students a visceral experience of textual devices before calling them by name or analyzing them. This highly interactive workshop is ideal for teachers who work with literary texts in any academic discipline; the techniques have proven especially helpful for dense, complicated, and/or period texts. Participants in earlier, similar workshops rated them 4.9/5 and offered comments such as these:

- "I don't have an acting bone in my body, but Kate made it fun to work on the text aloud."
- "Speaking Henry IV's speech in so many different ways gave me lots of ideas about how better to teach poetry."
- "Now I know how to get my students to see that a poem is meant to be spoken and heard."

Workshop size is limited and pre-registration required. *Please pre-register on the TRC website or by calling the TRC. Sponsored by the Teaching Resource Center.*

THE WRITING LIFE OF SCHOLARS

A talk for faculty and graduate students in the humanities and social sciences given by **William Germano**, *Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, The Cooper Union; Former publishing director at Routledge and editor-in-chief at Columbia UP, and Author of Getting It Published and From Dissertation to Book*

Thursday, February 22, 1:30-3:30 pm, Newcomb Hall, Commonwealth Room

What does a beginning scholar imagine writing to be? How is that writing integrated into one's professional life? And what does it mean to be a *professional scholarly writer* anyway? Can't I just be a *professor*? This talk will consider specific issues of professional knowledge every faculty member needs to possess.

The talk will also explore ways in which writing is central not only to professional advancement (the what, why, and when of scholarly writing) but ways in which writing is capable of helping scholars fulfill both their own ambitions and the bigger job of engaging society more broadly.

The audience is encouraged to come with questions for the speaker.

This workshop is open to the entire University community, both faculty and graduate students. **Please pre-register on the TRC website or by calling the TRC.** Sponsored by the TRC Professors as Writers Program.

CONNECTING TEACHING AND RESEARCH

A panel discussion with **Tim Beatley**, *Teresa Heinz Professor of Sustainable Communities, Urban Planning*; **Debbie Roach**, *Cavaliers' Distinguished Professor of Biology*; **Tim Wilson**, *Sherrell J. Aston Professor Of Psychology*
Friday, March 23, 3:30-5:00 pm, Clemons Library, Room 407

Participants will have an opportunity to share their own ideas and questions about ways to make teaching and research activities productively synergistic after hearing from this panel of three colleagues whose research and teaching interact in a variety of ways, including these:

- Finding that students' questions or ideas point to future research directions
- Bringing one's research skills into the classroom in order to teach better
- Teaching one's current research to undergraduates effectively
- Developing a symbiotic professional life in which one's teaching and research enhance each other

Although the focus will be on undergraduate teaching, we will also share ideas about teaching graduate courses.

This panel is open to the entire University community, both faculty and graduate students. **Please pre-register on the TRC website or by calling the TRC.** Sponsored by the TRC University Teaching Fellows Program.

WRITING FOR THE PUBLIC

A panel discussion with **Vanessa Ochs**, *Associate Professor of Religious Studies*; **Mark Edmundson**, *Daniels' Family NEH Distinguished Teaching Professor of English*; **Lou Bloomfield**, *Professor of Physics*; **Marva Barnett**, *Professor & Director, Teaching Resource Center & French Department*
Monday, April 16, 2:00-3:30 pm, Clemons Library, Room 407

Panelists from a variety of academic disciplines will share why they have written scholarly books for a wide audience, and participants will be encouraged to discuss the advantages and disadvantages, challenges and benefits of senior faculty's writing for the public. They will also offer some how-to's, including envisioning one's audience, drafting a prospectus, and placing essays in magazines.

This panel has been created for faculty at the associate and full professor level. **Please pre-register on the TRC website or by calling the TRC.** Sponsored by the TRC Professors as Writers Program and the NEH Distinguished Teaching Professors Chairs Program.

Sponsored by the Office of the Vice Provost for Faculty Advancement:

New Faculty Tenure and Promotion Q and A

Provost Gene Block, Vice Provosts Gertrude Fraser and Milton Adams, and representatives from various Colleges

Tuesday, February 6
10:00-11:30 am
Newcomb Hall
Commonwealth Room

Staying Sane in Insane Places: Living Well While Doing Good

An interactive work/life balancing workshop by Susan Robison, Ph.D.

Thursday, February 15
For academic faculty (am)
and
general faculty and staff (pm)

For more information on these events, visit the VPFA website (<http://www.virginia.edu/vpfa/events.html>)

Videotapes and Handouts Available

Did you miss the January Teaching Workshop or find yourself wanting to attend two sessions at the same time? At the TRC you can check out a videotape of nearly any workshop and get a copy of the handouts that went with it.

TEACHING PORTFOLIO WORKSHOP

Applications considered beginning March 1, 2007. We accept a limited number of faculty and TAs into this workshop, which helps participants create their own teaching portfolio. The workshop consists of three group meetings on the mornings of May 14, 17, and 24 and individual meetings, occurring during the same two-week time period.

Produce a Portfolio in Ten Days

It's time again for our Teaching Portfolio Workshop! The TRC now offers this interdisciplinary workshop on analyzing and documenting teaching every two years, with the next scheduled in May. Nearly all the over 175 U.Va. faculty and TAs who have produced portfolios in this setting found that it provides structure, support, and feedback useful to accomplishing the task in a defined period of time. In response to a 2002 survey, 93% of the faculty and 100% of the TA participants said they found the Teaching Portfolio Workshop to be useful. The overall value respondents ascribed to having a portfolio was also high: 85% of all participants have found that it has been "very valuable" or "somewhat valuable" to have a teaching portfolio.

During this workshop, faculty and teaching assistants from a wide variety of academic disciplines create portfolios documenting effective teaching. Each participant benefits from rich interdisciplinary exchanges in the three group meetings over a ten-day period and from working one-on-one with a coach, a peer who has previously written a portfolio. Writers discover commonalities across disciplines, consider what is unique about teaching their field, and share thoughtful approaches to producing a portfolio based on evidence.

To see sample portfolios created at previous Workshops, stop by the TRC to view our reference file or visit the *Workshops / Teaching Portfolios* pages on the TRC website for on-line portfolios and more information.



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