Documenting your Teaching: A Guide to Promote Reflective and Responsive Instruction

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DOCUMENTING YOUR TEACHING

A Guide to Promote Reflective and Responsive Instruction

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Abstract

Why is teaching documentation so important right now in the educational context? In the United States, teaching, along with research and service, is a crucial component of someone's professional profile in academia. As part of the review process for faculty reappointment or promotion, most institutions require evidence of effective teaching. This article provides key guidelines for how faculty can collect, explain, and showcase their impact and potential as effective instructors in their teaching dossiers or portfolios. Teaching dossiers are based on three main components: materials from oneself, materials from others, and products of good teaching and student learning (Seldin et al, 2010). This article also discusses some strategies that teachers may use to document their teaching, such as journaling and self-assessment and collaborative assessment (Farrell, 2013, 2018, 2019; Spicer-Escalante & Kannan, 2016). The guidelines and resources outlined in this article are supported by ten years of experience in assisting colleagues from different disciplines to write their teaching documentation and assemble the evidence to support their claims. We share the model that we have successfully used in a mentoring program within a university context. We conclude that only by documenting our teaching efforts and thinking about them will we be able to begin our path toward a more reflective and responsive practice in our classrooms.

Keywords: documenting teaching, teaching portfolios, collaborative assessment, self-assessment, peer-evaluation, journaling

Introduction

In the last three decades, the growing demand in the United States for faculty members to demonstrate evidence of teaching excellence has required academic institutions to develop recommendations or guidelines for how to showcase faculty teaching. Along with this increasing demand, traditional methods for measuring teaching excellence, such as number of classes, number of students taught, activities and exams assigned, and student evaluations, have been augmented by more formal instruments, such as teaching portfolios and structured peer observations to assist faculty members with documenting their teaching performance (Burnap et al., 2016; French & O' Leary, 2016; Seldin et al., 2010; Wood, 2017, among others). As Burnap et al. (2016) have stated: "Evaluating teaching effectiveness is a task performed by nearly all faculty in almost every institution of higher education. Yet, the evaluation of teaching is controversial, particularly as it relates to the core elements of teaching effectiveness" (p. 38).

Teaching documentation portfolios or teaching dossiers have been a common strategy to meet these demands in academia (Burnap et al., 2016; French & O'Leary, 2016; Seldin et al., 2010). Among institutions of higher education, there is a consensus about which documents should be included in the teaching dossier to support evidence of effectiveness or excellence in teaching. Thus, this article presents the model that has framed the teaching documentation workshop in

which we have served as mentors for over ten years to colleagues from different disciplines as they create their teaching dossiers. In our institution, all teaching documentation dossiers that faculty members compiled during the workshop, in conjunction with their research and/or service endeavors, have served as crucial components of the review process for faculty reappointment or for tenure/promotion cases.

Why Is Documenting Our Teaching Important?

In academia in the United States, we are routinely asked about our research—what we research, why we do that research, how the research is making an impact, how we measure that impact, where the research is leading, how our research has changed and improved over time, what are our short and long-term goals, and plans for accomplishing those goals. Most of us are good storytellers of our research. When documenting our teaching, we need to think about these same kinds of questions regarding our teaching and be able to tell that story as well (Forsyth, 2016; Seldin et al., 2010). As Halonen et al. (2012) have stated:

> Rather than simply providing a laundry list of publications, committee memberships, and courses taught, take care to document your work and accomplishments (including teaching, service, and scholarship) as part of a coherent career with a trajectory that will continue to contribute to the institution's goals. (p. 145)

Documenting your teaching is, of course, important for making a case for tenure and/or promotion. Equally important, documenting your teaching is a way to improve your teaching and student learning. As we take the time each semester or year to update our documentation, we have the opportunity to initiate new changes, implement professional learning we have acquired, reflect on innovations, and gather evidence for the relative success of our innovations. We may find that we have evidence to advocate for funding or resources to improve the learning experience for students.

Audience Awareness

When explaining our teaching to an audience outside our own field, we need to be able to describe what our teaching is about, not just the numbers and titles of our courses, but who takes those courses, what are the learning outcomes, and what are the challenges, including factors such as class size. As Halonen et al. (2012) advise: "Be aware of your audience. This includes not only following institutional guidelines and traditions concerning how materials are presented but also taking care that your materials communicate effectively to colleagues from multiple disciplinary perspectives" (p. 145).

Course goals differ by level of learner and program type, so it's important to be able to explain if the students are undergraduates taking the course to fulfill general education requirements, undergraduates taking the course as part of their major program, graduates taking the course to fulfill a research requirement or as an elective or depth course in their specialization. The audience(s) for a course is a major factor when determining learning outcomes as well as teaching methods.

Teaching Documentation Dossier

To facilitate the organization of the teaching documentation dossier, we propose it be divided into three main areas, according to the nomenclature established by Seldin et al. (2010), as follows: materials from oneself, materials from oth-

ers, and products of good teaching and student learning. This classification provides a framework for organizing a dossier that can be common across disciplines (McFarland, 2005; Ouellett, 2007; Wood, 2017).

In the next sections, we briefly describe the necessary documents that each category may include in a US context. We recommend that the narrative be 10-12 double-spaced pages. This narrative should be followed "by a series of appendix files that provide documentation for the claims made in the narrative. Information in both the narrative and the appendices should be carefully selected for relevance and cohesion" (Seldin et al., 2010, p. 19). For specific examples of teaching dossier narratives across disciplines at Utah State University, see Spicer-Escalante & Bullock (2019), and for examples across disciplines and institutions, see Seldin et al. (2010).

Materials from Oneself

Most of the models of teaching documentation dossiers include a thorough perspective of who we are as effective teachers and thus should include materials from oneself, specifically the following:

- Teaching responsibilities: We must specify our main area of teaching, teaching load per semester or academic year, and the type of courses and enrollments. If we have an administrative role, advising, or extension responsibilities, these can be explained, if applicable. To make this information easy to understand for our audience, it can be displayed in a table followed by a brief introduction.
- Teaching philosophy: We must describe our teaching philosophy (or a set of principles that guide our teaching) in terms of style, the research that undergirds our view of how students learn, the knowledge of our students, and the nature of our discipline. In other words, the teaching philosophy answers questions such as: How do I define myself as a teacher? What is my main goal in the classroom and why? What type of activities do I design to reinforce my teaching approach and why? Our philosophy of teaching is deeply intertwined with the methods we use to not only teach but also to assess student learning. If we can think about what (including research on teaching and learning) and who have influenced our teaching approaches and perspectives, this reflective process will inform our instructional design, course activities, intended learning outcomes, and assessment of those outcomes (Beatty et al., 2002; Coppola, 2002; Schönwetter et al., 2002).
- Methods: Not only must we be able to discuss the methods we use to teach our courses and how those methods align with our teaching philosophy, but we should also be able to explain how our methods align with the evidence base for how adults learn, both in general and in specific disciplines. We need to explain the importance of our instructional methods, the role of both teachers and students, and what strategies we use to make content comprehensible for students. If an instructor keeps a teaching journal, some of the material for methods (or philosophy) might be found there.

In short, materials from oneself should provide a thorough and compelling narrative of who we are as instructors, how we teach, and why we use the methods that we do. Seldin et al. (2010) recommend that this section of the narrative comprise three to five pages of the teaching dossier, whereas the documents, such as samples of teaching activities, learning outcomes, and assessment strategies, that support the claims expressed in the narrative should appear in the appendices.

Materials from Others

The evidence for the effectiveness of our teaching methods should also include evidence of the impact on student learning. How students learn should be documented, and that information can serve to bolster our instructional decisions.

The methods we use to teach will (and should) change over time in response to students' feedback and in response to evidence about student learning that we discover through our professional development activities. Thus, materials from others may include the following documents:

1. statements from colleagues who have observed you in the classroom and/or reviewed your classroom materials or syllabi
2. student course and teaching evaluation data
3. peer and self-evaluations (which will be discussed later in more detail)
4. invitations to present papers at conferences on teaching in your discipline or on teaching in general
5. teaching awards

In the United States, tenure or promotion committee members or supervisors (and others) should observe our teaching and provide letters to include in our documentation. The number of observations is less important than that they are systematic and repeated, which means having one person observe a particular class every semester is more valuable than many people observing different classes randomly throughout your probationary period (Amrein-Beardsley et al., 2012; Kanuka, & Sadowski, 2020; Kohut et al. 2007). In addition to peer evaluations/observations of our teaching, we can also invite others from our discipline (at other institutions) to review syllabi or teaching materials, including online courses. In both cases, live observation and asynchronous evaluation of syllabi or course materials, we need to document our response to the feedback we receive. How did we act on the feedback and why? What changes did we make to syllabi, course structure, live class sessions, patterns of interaction, etc.?

We can also use mid-course surveys and evaluations to gather student feedback that will enable us to make course revisions or otherwise respond to student concerns. Again, we should document what we do with that feedback. We may not necessarily make changes based on every comment or concern, but when we analyze the data and see a pattern that warrants reflection, planning, and action, it should be documented. According to Seldin et al. (2010), the narrative that depends upon materials from others should be between three to four pages in length, and the evidence supporting the claims expressed should be included in the appendices.

Products of Good Teaching and Student Learning

Another element to include in a teaching dossier is the products that result from good teaching and/or student learning. In general terms, these are some of the specific documents that may be referenced in this section to show teaching effectiveness:

1. student scores before and after a unit, module, course
2. student essays, creative work, fieldwork reports
3. alumni statements on the quality of instruction
4. student publications or conference presentations on course-related work
5. examples of graded student essays along with your comments

The documents themselves (e.g., the data, student writing, tests) should be provided in an appendix.

Pre- and post-assessments of student learning are an excellent way to document the impact of our teaching. Depending on the course, students may begin with a rich store of background information or very little. If we can document that beginning point, then, at the end of the semester, we can document the endpoint and analyze the results. Some course

content lends itself to a traditional pre-test post-test format, but some course content does not. You might survey students about their self-efficacy regarding skills they are meant to acquire during the course, or you might find novel ways to document their growth over time.

For this section that discusses the products of good teaching and student learning, the narrative should be two to three pages in length, and the materials or documents supporting the claims should be in the appendices.

Reflective Practices: Teaching Journals and Self- and Collaborative Assessments

The process of selecting materials for a teaching dossier, as described above, organically leads us to reflect upon and assess our own teaching. Reflection, in turn, leads us to set goals, both short-term and long-term. Then we take action that moves us toward those new goals and results in new outcomes. Those outcomes lead us back to the question of what and how we teach. In this way, we establish a productive ongoing loop of reflective practice.

Beyond the traditional institutional procedures or instruments to evaluate teaching, instructors have myriad resources that are useful for documenting their teaching, resources such as concept mapping, blogging, teaching journals, and self- or collaborative assessment, among others. This section will focus exclusively on the benefits and potentials of reflective teaching journals (Farrell, 2013, 2018, 2019) and self-assessment or collaborative assessment of teaching as valuable tools for not only reflecting on our instructional practices but also for informing others about how we teach in our specific discipline, our teaching strengths, as well as areas for improvement (Pereira et al., 2020; Halonen et al. 2002; Spicer-Escalante & deJonge-Kannan, 2016).

Although the notions of reflection and reflective practice are frequently used among professionals in teaching, "there is still not agreement across the professions about how to define the concept or indeed what strategies promote reflection" (Farrell, 2019, p. 2). Research in the field has developed various definitions of reflective practice according to the needs and context of the project at hand. Farrell (2019) presents a detailed record on the historical evolution of the concept of reflective practice. For this article, we define reflective practice as the intellectual activity "in which teachers systematically collect data about their practice, and, while engaging in dialogue with others, use the data to make informed decisions about their practice both inside and outside the classroom" (Farrell, 2014, p. 123). The teaching documentation dossier, the teaching journals, and the self-assessment or collaborative assessment of teaching are processes that require instructors to engage in constant and systematic reflection with the goal of making informed decisions about their instructional practices.

Teaching Journals

If you are a teacher who has not had the opportunity to reflect upon your practice, teaching journals are an effective means to do so. Keeping a teaching journal allows practitioners to slow down and take a step back from their teaching to think about the aspects they want to document. Teachers can start by writing general notes about their instruction after every lesson: what went well today, what can be improved, what did I notice about students' participation, etc. Later, teachers can go back to their notes and identify the most salient features of their teaching. "Those who write a journal take responsibility and ownership for their own development because they are forced to stop and think not only as they write, but also as they try to make sense of their thoughts in the journal" (Farrell, 2013, p. 83). Slowing down a little in our teaching practice, distancing ourselves from it, and reflecting on it, provides us with a powerful opportunity to modify and add new approaches to our teaching to make it more effective.

Research suggests that instructors who regularly keep a teaching journal can "accumulate information that on later review, interpretation, and reflection can assist them in gaining deeper understanding of their work" (Farrell, 2019, p. 64). Research also shows that teaching journals may benefit instructors in several unexpected ways. Teaching journals can become a problem-solving mechanism, a device to record new teaching ideas, and a process to validate and endorse instructors' teaching practices. Teaching journals can also provide practitioners with a safe space to experiment, to express their doubts, fears, frustrations, and questions about the profession in general and about their teaching.

Practitioners can keep their teaching journals to themselves without disclosing them to anyone else, or they might decide to share their journals with other colleagues who have a similar interest in improving their teaching. Research has shown multiple benefits of working with peers in these teaching endeavors. That is, teachers write their journals for themselves, reflect on their practice and, at some point, when they have gathered enough insights, they can collaborate with colleagues to improve their teaching. Farrell (2018) provides a list of some of the possible purposes that both individual and collaborative teaching journals may offer for instructors engaged in the improvement of their instructional practice. In his conclusion, Farrell (2018) states:

> Writing a teaching journal has an added advantage in that it can be done alone by individual teachers, or it can be shared with other teachers. When teachers share their reflective journals, they not only foster collegial interaction, but they can also gain different perspectives about their work while also contributing to professional knowledge in the field as a whole (p. 151).

Whatever model is adopted, keeping a teaching journal is one of the best approaches available for teachers to reflect on and improve their teaching. Because teaching journals show effectiveness of teaching methods and student learning, they can be included in the materials-from-self section of the teaching documentation dossier or as support material in an appendix.

Self-assessment and Collaborative Assessment of Teaching

Although self-assessment as a tool to evaluate teaching performance has not been widely accepted, in the last two decades, research provides evidence that, when self-assessment is systematically and consistently used, it can be a very powerful approach to not only evaluate teaching but also to improve it. Halonen et al. (2012) assert that "a substantive self-evaluation process provides useful evidence of faculty performance" (p. 145). Thus, self-assessment is an alternate way to inform others about our practice.

Spicer-Escalante and deJonge-Kannan (2016) presented a self- and collaborative assessment of teaching protocol that blends both self-assessment and peer evaluations. This model requires that both the teacher who is observed and the observer(s) become responsible participants in the evaluation process, establishing a dialogical relationship:

> In this model, peers are no longer merely spectators but rather active participants in professional development. They are expected to make recommendations for improvement and there is a specific space for them to do so. Thus, the observed instructor, who expects these suggestions, has the opportunity not only to reflect upon the offered suggestions but he/she is also able to respond to them. (p. 637)

In this self- and collaborative assessment approach, the "observed instructor is the one who writes the self-report, taking into consideration the feedback and insights offered by the peer and establishing a dialogue with the peer" (Spicer-Escalante & deJonge-Kannan, 2016, p. 637). Both the observers and the observed teacher follow a guided observation protocol as shown below:

Seven steps of the observation procotol:

1. At least a week ahead of time, teacher and observer coordinate what date/time/location the observation will take place.
2. Teacher arranges for someone to video record the lesson that will be observed.
3. Ideally, no less than 48 hours before the scheduled observation, teacher emails observer two documents: syllabus for the course and detailed lesson plan for the day.
4. Teacher and observer review objectives and areas of concern.
5. While observing, observer takes notes on the observation form. Crucially, observer does not send notes to teacher until after teacher completely step 6.
6. Teacher observed watches self on video and writes a self-reflection describing specific aspects of the lesson that went well and specific aspects that could be improved. Teacher sends this self-reflection to observer, at which point observer sends observer's notes to teacher.
7. After reading observer's notes, teacher integrates own and observer's notes in a self- and collaborative assessment of teaching statement.

The observation protocol includes a pre-observation meeting, teacher reflection on the video-recorded lesson, and integration of observer's notes. In this self-collaborative assessment model, "it is crucial that the teacher watch and reflect on the video before receiving the observer's notes, so as not to be influenced a priori by the observer's critique" (Spicer-Escalante & deJonge-Kannan, 2016, p. 639). This protocol allows the teacher to be engaged in critical self-reflection and to identify not only the areas for improvement but also areas of strength. Since this observation and assessment practice entails responsibility from both parties involved, the assessment is complemented and refined by the dialogue between participants, transforming this model into a collaborative assessment of teaching.

Spicer-Escalante and deJonge-Kannan's research (2016), carried out with graduate students, suggests that their approach to teaching assessment is a valid and powerful model for novice language instructors to reflect upon their practice and to identify the areas of strengths as well as areas for improvement. As stated by Barber (1990), "the greatest value of self-assessment is the increased instructional improvement that results from a greater insight into one's own strengths and weaknesses" (p. 218). Instructors are more willing to make modifications to their practice when they identify those requirements by themselves than when they are told by a supervisor or a coordinator about the areas in which they need to improve. In their conclusion, Spicer-Escalante and deJonge-Kannan (2016) underline that the implementation of their model:

> has demonstrated that addressing teaching as a whole activity, which includes analyzing, evaluating, and reflecting, is the only path towards a new conception of classroom practice. Likewise, [it] has proven to be a more sensitive approach to teaching and evaluation because it entails a dialogue between observed instructor and observers. (p. 646)

Their research also highlights that another relevant benefit of the self-assessment model is the possibility to inform and educate colleagues not familiar with the specific discipline being taught about the nuances and strategies embedded in the teaching and learning of that discipline. The study conducted by Pereira et al. (2020) with pre-service instructors teaching English in Brazil also emphasizes the benefits that self-assessment offers to novice instructors to learn how to become reflective practitioners.

Conclusion

These reflective approaches only work if teachers are committed to improving their teaching. If teachers are not willing to abandon some practices to make their teaching more effective, the teaching assessment will not be productive. As educators, we must be ready to face with honesty and maturity the challenges that our teaching reflection could bring to us. Self-assessment can be painful at first; however, reflecting upon our practices to make informed decisions can only benefit us, our students, and our institutions. Research in the field suggests that systematically documenting someone's teaching endeavors provides a pathway not only for personal growth but also for academic and professional growth (Fox et al., 2001, French & O'Leary 2016).

Practitioners are responsible for ensuring that their evidence on teaching effectiveness is clear, concise, compelling, and well-documented. Halonen et al. (2012) emphasized this aspect: "We urge faculty to carefully construct that evidence so that all constituents are able to evaluate the merits of individual contributions to student learning as objectively as possible" (p. 145). This is only possible if practitioners can present their evidence in a well-articulated way that is comprehensible by their peers as well as by readers outside of their disciplines.

As Wood (2012) has underlined, "teaching does not exist in a vacuum away from the needs and priorities of the wider academy, and as such, the nature of excellence is a reflection of wider institutional and sector-level pressures and contexts" (p. 43). Only by documenting our teaching efforts and critically reflecting on them will we be able to start our pathway toward more reflective and responsive teaching practices in our classrooms.

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