Honoring the Process for Honoring Teaching

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The Fate of the Teaching Portfolio Few ideas are as appealing on the surface as encouraging professors to gather and reflect on materials that best represent their teaching excellence. Indeed, developing a teaching portfolio, or dossier, has become a popular faculty development activity in many departments and on many campuses. To create a portfolio, faculty select syllabi, tests, student work, and student evaluations about one or more courses, and add a reflective statement, usually called a *teaching philosophy*, about their teaching goals. In almost all cases, reports from the field state that professors find reaffirming the teaching portfolio *process* and the opportunity to reflect on their teaching, document successes, explain their teaching struggles, and find out that others have faced the same challenges.

Sometimes, but certainly not always, faculty members who have portfolios submit them for decisions about tenure, promotion, or honors. It is unfortunate that institutions in the United States and Canada that use portfolios have stopped short of reporting any explicit criteria they use to evaluate them. However, a small, but growing, group of colleges and universities is tackling the delicate process of negotiating and designing an evaluation-of-teaching system (ETS), *an institutionalized process of periodic assessment of, and feedback about, individual effectiveness in achieving stated goals for student learning, within the context of disciplinary, academic unit, and institutional norms*.

Why have so few colleges implemented detailed systems to evaluate their teaching portfolios? The primary reason is that to create a useful ETS, faculty must contribute their own personal criteria as the system is developed. This is a time-consuming activity, and one in which most faculty are unprepared to participate. Faculty and administrators, alike, must learn to define their personal values, take the time to practice alternatives, and to negotiate with their colleagues both easy and difficult decisions.

A Developmental Solution To guide such efforts, we have developed a two-course curriculum for faculty and administrators, with over 100 brief assignments to be completed individually and as a group (Richlin & Manning, 1995). Faculty and administrators move from the personal, private development of their criteria for teaching excellence, through group discussions of basic educational issues, to the design of a pilot ETS, and, finally, to the safe tryout and redesign of their system.

Teaching Portfolio 101: Developing Personal Criteria. We believe that private work on a personal portfolio, focused through the detailed knowledge each instructor has about his or her courses, is the easiest and fastest way to identify an individual's goals and values in teaching. All the necessary material is close at hand, or easily-completed natural extensions of available material. For the course they choose, instructors write memos explaining the syllabus, student assignments, student work, and student feedback. The very process of selecting material for inclusion in a course portfolio is an expression of the faculty member's criteria for good teaching; the memos make instructors *aware* of their own criteria in a form they will be able to share with their colleagues later on.

Teaching Portfolio 102: Discussing Basic Issues. During the next semester of the course, instructors create a second course portfolio, including another set of reflective memos, and add an overarching reflective statement that distills what they value about their teaching. This work continues to be done privately. At the same time, the academic unit begins to work together, but *not directly on evaluation-of-teaching issues*. Assignments are carefully focused on

a small number of key topics. This balance of private and public work reflects our belief that most people need time to reflect before they are ready to express their decisions about what is excellent teaching.

Peer Review 101: Considering Elements of the Review Process. Having completed the private work necessary, at this point faculty and administrators begin the delicate process of negotiating and designing an ETS that will fit their academic unit and institution. The first task for participants in this phase is to identify what ETS actually exists in their academic unit. It is our assertion that all teaching units already have an ETS; however, as many faculty who have gone through the tenure and promotion process would testify, it may not be easy to find out what it is. Next, the group decides on what material will be evaluated in their ETS and chooses among three types of measurement systems: *qualitative*, where evaluators write a simple narrative for each material; *ranked*, where they indicate whether the material is *unsatisfactory, satisfactory, or outstanding*, and write a short narrative describing why; or *quantitative*, where the evaluator assigns an agreed-upon number of points to each item, based on predetermined criteria. Assignments in this phase are designed to aid faculty in finding their level of comfort in evaluating their colleague's work.

Peer Review 102: Testing and Revising the System. The final phase provides the opportunity for faculty members and administrators to test and revise their new system. Instructors evaluate their own portfolios first, providing written commentary based on the unit's ETS. They then work with colleagues and provide both written and verbal feedback about the materials provided. After testing their ETS, the group reassembles to refine and revise the system before it is formally implemented.

An ETS to Trust An ETS that works must be manageable, satisfy environmental demands, and honor the process of development by the faculty involved. To be manageable, it is important to be realistic about the costs of an ETS: information is expensive; it will take time and money to obtain. To meet environmental demands, the ETS must provide formative feedback to faculty interested in improving their teaching and summative information to other stakeholders, such

as administrators, parents, employers, alumni, and politicians, who want proof that learning is taking place in the unit. To honor the process, the group needs to develop its knowledge of personal and community values, ideas, alternatives, resources, and dreams, as they create an ETS that can be trusted by all of its members.

Reference

Richlin, L., & Manning, B. (1995). *Improving a college/university teaching evaluation system: A comprehensive, developmental curriculum for faculty & administrators*. Pittsburgh: Alliance Publishers, (800) 718-4287.