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The Use of Teaching Portfolios for Academic Professional Development

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Context of Academic Portfolio Development

This Postgraduate Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching is located in the Faculty of Academic Affairs in the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and is aimed at new and existing academic staff in third level institutions in the Republic of Ireland, including lecturers, librarians, and academic support staff, the latter two having responsibility for teaching in their areas. It was initially offered in 2000, and is continuing apace today, with currently over 90 academic staff having successfully graduated from the programme. The lecturers have been drawn from within DIT and a number of higher education institutions throughout the Republic of Ireland, and a wide variety of subject disciplines in the Applied Arts, Science, Tourism and Food, Engineering, the Built Environment and Business have been represented. There is also a variation in terms of teaching spectrum ranging from lecturers working on apprenticeship courses to those involved in undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes.

There are two modules on the Programme: 'Learning and Teaching in Higher Education' and 'Designing Curricula and Assessment Strategies'. Each module is assessed through the design and development of an individual teaching portfolio. MacIsaac and Jackson (1992) have mapped out three broad sets of assessment functions that portfolios can serve:

- portfolios for self-assessment or reflection on personal growth;
- portfolios that facilitate progress assessment within an educational programme for adults;
- portfolios that enhance self-presentation to external sources.

The portfolio process that the teachers undertake on this programme serves a dual purpose in that it allows for self assessment and reflection on personal growth and it also serves as a mechanism for summative assessment of the modules.

Klenowski *et al.* (2006) have concluded that if learning portfolios are to be used for assessment, as is the case in this Programme, there needs to be an explicit and ongoing discussion with the participants about why they are being used, and the model of learning and professional development on which they are based.

Attendance and face-to-face participation for each of the two modules on the Programme is normally for three hours per week for fifteen weeks. The Programme is situated in the context of experiential learning for academic staff in higher education. This takes place in a number of ways on the programme: through analysis of classroom situations, episodes and experiences in microteaching groups, where the teachers can discuss their own and other participants' educational practices; by collaboratively experimenting with instructional strategies and materials aimed at collecting information on different aspects of classroom activity, and finally, fruitfully interpreting this information from a professional perspective.

The process for portfolio development that was settled on for the Postgraduate Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching had at its core the idea of sharing knowledge with peers, reflecting on teaching, making knowledge on teaching public, and gathering evidence around teaching and student learning. As this was the first programme of its genre in the Republic of Ireland, we looked at what was happening internationally in this area, and a review revealed that the teaching portfolio is an ideal source from which to view your own teaching philosophy, practice, effectiveness, goals and development.

The Objectives of Portfolio Development
The portfolio was to be a vehicle for academic staff to reflect and document issues in their teaching and learning in order to inform or improve their practice. The process of portfolio development was to provide them with an opportunity to chronicle their growth as learners and add to their understanding about their practice. Providing opportunities to

form a learning community and collaborate with peers was considered important by all involved. To achieve this, dialogue was encouraged as was the development of supportive relationships, so that learning took place from and with peers to create a culture of collaboration, connectedness and commitment to community. Procedures were designed for preparing portfolios and the portfolio framework was outlined. The portfolio contents included core and optional items as well as written tasks and reflective entries on teaching improvements.

The objectives of the Programme Team was to support academic staff in their attempts to connect with their professional practice through the development of a teaching portfolio. In this regard, it was considered important to enable them to become reflective in regard to their teaching practice. Reflective practice is a process of learning and developing through examining our own practice (Bolton, 2001) and writing the portfolio is the vehicle for reflection. It was also important to offer ongning support to each participant as they committed to the intensive and oftentimes demanding process of developing a teaching portfolio of that practice and so each person was assigned a tutor. In regard to peers, there were many opportunities provided to enable them to benefit from collaborating with likeminded colleagues also undergoing the same concentrated development process.

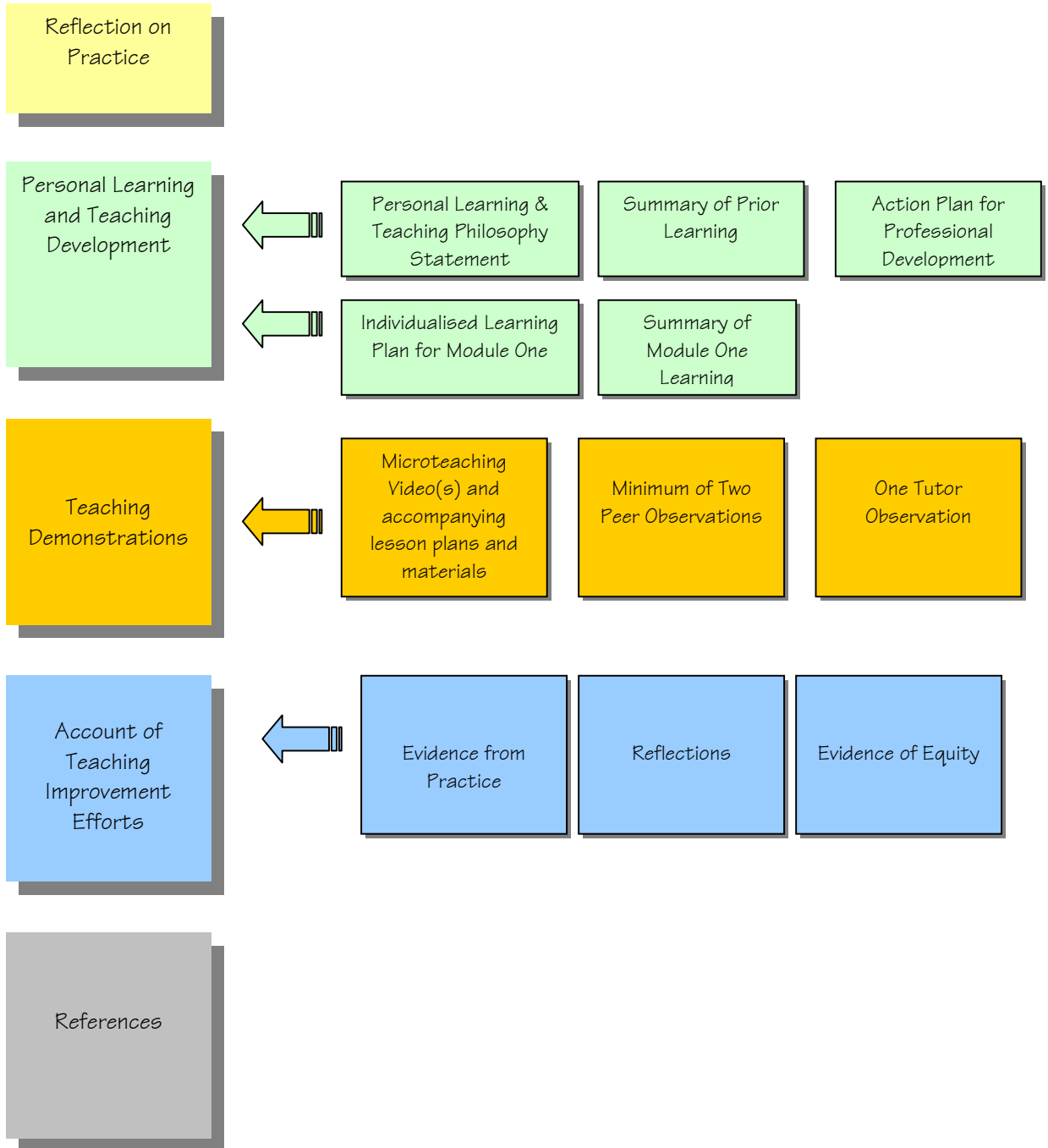**How is the Portfolio constructed? What does it value? Why?**
A definition of the nature of the Teaching Portfolio required for this programme is provided early in the module to the participants. It is to be a written, reflective collection of work, summarising a teacher's approach to learning and teaching, and providing evidence of major teaching activities and accomplishments. Its essence is to highlight and demonstrate their knowledge and skills in teaching in higher education.

Taking this further, while the portfolio will document evidence of the selected accomplishments as a teacher, and will be substantiated by samples of work, it will be only fully realised through the process of *reflective writing* and *deliberation* by the teacher on the contents (Lyons, 1998). Therefore, the portfolio will be created through a

thoughtful process of collecting concrete evidence of teaching and students' learning and organising it in a meaningful way. Therefore all Portfolio entries carry a crucial element: that is reflection. Through reflection, a lecturer revisits and inquires into his/her teaching and learning, assessing what succeeded or failed and why. In this process, lecturers uncover the meanings and interpretations they make of their own practices. Through the portfolio they can make this knowledge public and open to scrutiny. Thus the portfolio can be both a means of inquiring into teaching and a way of recording the results of that process. Figure 1 (overleaf) illustrates the required structure for the portfolio for each of the two modules on the PG Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching.

Figure 1

The Portfolio Structure (Learning and Teaching in Higher Education)

Reflection on Practice	

Personal Learning and Teaching Development	Personal Learning & Teaching Philosophy Statement — Summary of Prior Learning — Action Plan for Professional Development
	Individualised Learning Plan for Module One — Summary of Module One Learning

Teaching Demonstrations	Microteaching Video(s) and accompanying lesson plans and materials — Minimum of Two Peer Observations — One Tutor Observation

Account of Teaching Improvement Efforts	Evidence from Practice — Reflections — Evidence of Equity

References

The Portfolio Structure (Designing Curricula and Assessment Strategies)

Reflection on Practice		
Personal Learning and Teaching Development ⬅	**Individualised Learning Plan for Module Two**	**Reflective Account of Module Two Learning:** 1. Curriculum Design 2. Assessment Strategies 3. Group Work **Action Plan for Professional Development**
Design for Learning ⬅	**Small Scale Curriculum and Assessment Project**	
Scholarship of Learning and Teaching ⬅	**Resource Review**	**Thematic Paper**
References		

Within each portfolio, there is a broad menu of possible portfolio entries. All evidence and reflections in the portfolio are categorised into specific learning and teaching areas. Reflection on practice is an overview of the entire portfolio. It needs to be holistic in nature and not episodic to reflect the overarching theme that is chosen for the work.

A standard area for inclusion in Portfolio One is the 'Personal Learning and Teaching Development' of the participant. Essentially this is a statement of the participant's own philosophy on learning and teaching. The philosophy should mirror the way in which the participant tries to apply their underlying personal teaching philosophy through the development, implementation and subsequent modification of their teaching practice and how they have reflected on this process. The portfolio documents their own teaching philosophy, practice, effectiveness, goals and development. They should reflect on the portfolio being a personal statement of their growth in understanding of teaching and learning based on analyses of their teaching performance and of any actions they take for improvement.

To complete the participant's learning and teaching development, there are four linked sections required. Firstly, a summary of prior learning reveals the participant's route to the course and it includes details of learning in a variety of contexts (academic, work-place). Secondly, an individualised learning plan for the module in which the Portfolio will be developed. This is a personal account of the participant's hopes and expectations for learning in the module. Thirdly, a summary and self-assessment of what was learned by the end of the module and finally, an action plan for further professional development in the future.

Teaching Demonstrations

This section includes selected lesson plans, materials and reviews made in relation to micro-teaching tutorials. The Microteaching Tutorials provided the participants with the opportunity to demonstrate the appropriate application of some of the following learning and teaching strategies appropriate to the their current teaching:

- Making presentations can take the form of a lecture, a tutorial or a demonstration.

- Facilitating group learning includes a choice from seminars and discussion groups.
- Facilitating active learning methods can utilize a case study, or a role play.
- Facilitating practical or laboratory classes.
- Effective use of one appropriate technology for teaching and learning within their own subject area (of the media and technologies used in the programme).

There are two microteaching sessions held in Module One. The participants can choose to include a video of their teaching practice from microteaching sessions, and, they also have the option of videotaping their own authentic classroom-based teaching practice, and including that video in their portfolio.

To complement the teaching demonstrations, participants are required to organize two peer and one tutor observation of their classroom teaching practice, and this further provides a further basis for reflection both individually and in collaboration with colleagues and tutors. Our experience of this process is that it provides the opportunity for teachers from diverse disciplines to engage in a dialogue around generic issues of learning and teaching within higher education. It brings to the fore, the richness of the different perspectives and allows important conversations to continue outside of the module.

A second main focus of the Portfolio is inclusion of an account of any efforts made to improve teaching practice. Included here are reflections on teaching improvement efforts through a summary of reflective entries, which address a number of important issues. Firstly, it is important for the participant to reflect on how they have applied their knowledge of learning theories and teaching strategies by actually using a wider variety of teaching strategies in their microteaching and in their classroom practice.

Secondly, the participant needs to show how they have learned from observing the teaching of others, and from the self-observations, peer-observations and tutor observations of their own teaching practice. This is complemented by an analysis of the

participant's own teaching experiences through research about learning in their courses and through peer, tutor, and student feedback.

Thirdly, the participant is encouraged to show how they have gained an understanding of individual student needs and perspectives, and how new teaching methods have been used to meet those needs (including equity issues and social inclusion). They can include how they have used formative evaluations to provide students with on-going feedback about their learning.

Finally, ongoing reflection is needed on the role of the lecturer within their institution; this can include a consideration of leadership, management, research, administrative roles in addition to the learning and teaching role.

Reflective Writing

The complex nature of teaching and learning means that resolution is not absolute and while solutions from one context may guide thinking in another, solutions are not necessarily universally appropriate or applicable and thus the need for reflection. Loughran (1996) argues that reflection helps the individual to learn from the experience because of the meaningful nature of the inquiry into the experience. Teachers as professionals must be supported in their attempts to reflect critically on their educational practice, as well as encouraged to adopt new and more effective conceptions of teaching and learning. Eraut (1994) emphasised that professionals continually learn on the job but that unless time is set aside to deliberate, the learning may not be integrated into any general theory of practice. Through the development of a portfolio lecturers focus on their own practice and reflect on issues that are arising in the context of their own practice. Argyris (1976) makes the distinction between espoused theories and theories in use. He contends that there is often a substantial contradiction between what we say we believe and how we actually act. Therefore, uncovering the contradictions in our professional work is demanding but an important stage in reaching an understanding of the complexity of the classroom or tutorial.

"Simply telling teachers about new curricular initiatives, asking them to take on new instructional methodology without helping them to understand the assumptions they are operating from, is a waste of time. People might take away 'nifty tips', but nothing really changes for students."

(Newman, 1998, p.191)

Critical reflection helps the learner to describe experiences, to analyse what they have learnt from those experiences and to offer a process of judgement by which they might frame current or future experiences (Brookfield, 1995). The portfolio process requires participants to engage in reflection on practice and to support this process lecturers were encouraged to interact with the literature and to consider strategies for reflection. This was supported by guided reflective activity using a model developed by Jenny Moon (2000) and the following questions were used to start participants on the process of reflection on practice.

- What teaching strategies do you currently employ?
- What is it that you have learned on this course to date that relates to current practice?
- What are the general implications of the new knowledge / skills for your teaching?
- How might you use the new learning to improve your professional practice?

Thus the challenge of engaging the lecturers in reflection is undertaken through the dual process of teaching about reflection and providing for guided reflective activity related to learning and teaching in higher education. The portfolio entries provides the framework for participants to reflect on teaching and learning in higher education and on their own practice and to learn from the experience and this is evident in the comments of course participants.

"You become less concerned with the content although that is important and reflect more on why you are teaching what you are teaching, how it links to everything else and the most appropriate way to present it to a particular group of students."

"I now think about the learning rather than the teaching and that make me think about the best way I as a teacher can enhance the learning experience. I certainly reflect more on what I do."

"I question much more what I do, why I am doing it and what the students will get from it."

There is evidence in the comments of staff involved in the course that their teaching practice has become a focus for considered reflection. The construction of the portfolios engages the lecturers in a process that results in them making explicit their theories about teaching, learning, the curriculum and the students they are teaching.

What challenges did you meet and how did you overcome them?

Klenowski (2002) contends that in the promotion of the portfolio for assessment and learning purposes there is the possibility that too much will be promised and that in practice a lot less will be achieved and it is important therefore to evaluate the process on a continuous basis. In the early stages of the Programme, participants were required to complete the portfolio in semester one for the assessment of Module One. However, evaluations showed that point, the requirements for the portfolio were regarded by participants of the time as too demanding within a short timeframe (September-January). In 2003, the portfolio structure was changed into two complementary parts, and spread over the academic year as per the structure outlined on page 5 and 6. In terms of the assessment , there are now two internal assessors of the portfolios, who, as has been since recommended by Tigelarr *et al*. (2005), know the candidates they assess. The development of definitive criteria for assessment which are given in writing to participants supports the judging of the portfolios, alongside continuous monitoring of the portfolio assessment process.

Outcomes of Portfolio Development within the Institution?

We have explored these both for individual learners and more widely at local/departmental/institutional levels and the construction of the portfolios engaged the

lecturers in a process that pushed them 'to revisit their own knowledge and express it in personally meaningful ways' (Lyons, 1998, p.51). It can be concluded that the process of generating a portfolio was an empowering if at times painful experience for the teachers. It helped them to manage their learning, to find their voice and to develop vital skills for success in teaching.

> *It raised the question of how I am teaching. It became very evident that I was teaching but not as well or how I should be teaching.*
>
> 2003-04 participant

> *It was brilliant to be able to write down your core values and you philosophy of education - things that are embedded in you but you never articulate and put them on paper.*
>
> 2002-03 participant

> *The educational change that occurred depends on what I as the teacher did and thought. For me, it is as simple and complex as that. It is not what anyone else thinks – it is what I think in my classroom, and that is what the portfolio does - it unearths the values I hold as a teacher.*
>
> 2004-05 participant

> *It does force you to reflect and discuss it with your colleagues. Teaching is an isolated profession so you do not have your peers around. But by doing the portfolio you are forced to get fee back from them. So it is making one's environment more friendly in which to work.*
>
> 2004-05 participant

Arguably a significant contribution to the portfolio process that we as academic staff developers can make is by maintaining a community of shared practices through campus-wide and inter-institutional conversation focused on forward-looking learning and teaching. This is to be achieved by providing quality support for all teachers from beginning instructors to experienced, highly regarded academic staff.

Unexpected outcomes of Portfolio Development

Through the portfolio process, the lecturers were able to expand their awareness of learning and teaching in higher education and to revise, adjust and develop their teaching in the light of this developing awareness. Learning to teach well is a lifelong pursuit and the portfolio process had placed these participants on an exploratory journey where

reflection and collaboration will be used to inform their teaching. Biggs (1999) contends that since teaching is a personal matter, new ideas need to be used reflectively and turned to one's own context. Through the process of the developing a portfolio, academics are developing a deeper understanding of learning and teaching in higher education. There is a critical and reflective approach evident in relation to classroom realities, student learning and the role of the teacher. Also, a discourse has developed around important issues in teaching and learning and there is a developing critical community of learners endeavouring to articulate and become more competent in their professional roles. Sachs (2000, p. 89) argues that what should emerge over time are 'cultures which place educational practice at their centre' and the portfolio process clearly has an important role to play in creating such a culture.

Do you have any plans for future development?

In this current academic year 2006-07, a formalised peer mentoring scheme has been introduced in which academic staff who have graduated from the Programme and thereby completed the design and development of an individual teaching portfolio enter into a mentoring relationship with staff entering a "new to them" (Woodd 1997 p.333) educational institution. Part of the role of the mentor will involve assisting and supporting the new participant to integrate into a community of practice within their department, and provide advice on the completion of the portfolio within a subject disciplinary context.

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