

# Defining Features and Significant Functions of the Course Portfolio

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Lee Shulman's opening chapter frames the themes of this volume broadly; he puts the emphasis not on portfolios themselves, not on documentation per se, but on the need — and responsibility — that educators, like other professionals, have to investigate, understand, contribute to, and build on the knowledge and practice of their field. This chapter turns to the course portfolio itself as a vehicle for meeting this need and responsibility, addressing some obvious questions readers are likely to have: What *is* a course portfolio? What are its distinctive advantages? How might it be useful to me, my colleagues, and my campus?

For starters, it should be said that course portfolios belong to a larger universe of portfolio use, which is, after all, not new. Professionals in fields such as architecture and photography have used portfolios for years to document and display their best work. In some educational contexts, such as the teaching of writing, *student* portfolios have long been part of the teaching and assessment repertoire. Over the last decade or so, faculty looking for better, more “full-bodied” ways of representing their pedagogical work have developed *teaching* portfolios. Indeed, many readers will come to the idea of the course portfolio through its cousin, the teaching portfolio, so it may be useful to begin by defining the former in reference to the latter . . . and to say at the outset that the course portfolio is not meant to replace the teaching portfolio, which is well-suited to a more comprehensive account of one's teaching practice as part of a longer career. Rather, the course portfolio can be seen as a subset of the teaching portfolio, designed to accomplish certain purposes more fully.

## Defining Features of the Course Portfolio

So what is a course portfolio? The best answer to this question is contained in the case studies that are included throughout this volume, in which faculty members from the AAHE Course Portfolio Working Group report in detail on their portfolio, how it came to be, what shape it takes, and what difference it has made in their teaching practice. As is clear from these cases, there is no single, standard formula for defining the course portfolio. Nevertheless, it is now possible, out of recently emerging practice, to make a number of generalizations about its defining features and comparative advantages.

### *A Focus on the Course*

In contrast to the typical teaching portfolio, in which the faculty member documents practice in a range of instructional contexts over time, the course portfolio focuses on the unfolding of a single course, from conception to results. The premise behind this design is not that the course should be the privileged con-

## CHAPTER

# 2

***“The course portfolio is a relatively new genre that is being developed to enable teachers to discuss both the scholarly and the pedagogical dimensions of their teaching; it provides a reflective outlet for articulating the intentions and experiences involved with teaching particular courses at a given time in a person's career.”***

RANDY BASS (THIS VOLUME, 91)

**"Putting everything together so that I could see the students' work in its entirety — from the rough and oftentimes uninspiring initial reviews to the fairly sophisticated and perceptive critiques that students were able to make by the end of the semester — illustrated in bold relief just how much progress most of the students made over the term, especially one or two individuals who were somewhat apprehensive about taking a course of this nature. Had I not gathered all of this material, I would probably not appreciate today how much progress some of the students had made by the end of the semester."**

MARY ANN HEISS  
(THIS VOLUME, 36-37)

text for examining teaching and learning. Indeed, as many educators point out, too much emphasis on the course can exacerbate the problem of disconnected, fragmentary learning "in boxes"; as Randy Bass points out in case study 9, it is the cumulation of experiences over multiple courses that leads to important forms of learning. But the course is, after all, the unit, "the package," in which most faculty think and talk about and conduct their teaching, and it is also the context in which content and process, curriculum and pedagogy, come together in a way that has some "travel," some portability: That is, I may or may not be interested in knowing about a colleague's teaching practice in general (which is what I am likely to find in a teaching portfolio), but I might very well be interested in her experience with a course that I myself sometimes teach, or that I rely on as a foundation for one of my own or attempt to build on.

Moreover, it is in many ways at the level of the course that teaching — which is to say, learning — rises or falls. Often when we talk about teaching effectiveness, we talk about snapshot-like moments — a powerful exchange in the final five minutes of Monday's class, a really lively small-group exercise. But, as Lee Shulman put it in a 1996 presentation to an AAHE conference audience, most teachers can be

*superbly Socratic once a month. . . . The real embarrassments of pedagogy are at the level of the course: the course that just doesn't quite hang together; the course where the students can't quite figure out how what you're doing this week relates to what you're doing next week, or why a major assignment is connected to the central themes of the course. The more holistic, coherent, integrated aspect of teaching is often where we fail.* (Shulman et al. 1996)

Conversely, it is at the level of the course that one sees real teaching excellence. The course is a powerful unit of analysis for documenting teaching because it is within the course that knowledge of the field intersects with knowledge about particular students and their learning.

The power of focusing not on the teacher's practice in general but on the teaching and learning in a particular course — and, as Shulman urges in chapter 1, on the relationship of one course to other courses — is a distinctive advantage of the course portfolio.

### ***A Spotlight on Student Learning***

Most teaching portfolios contain samples of student work, but the "unit of analysis" is primarily the teacher; that is, the purpose of the portfolio is to give a picture of the individual's teaching effectiveness. In contrast, the course portfolio puts the spotlight on student learning as the organizing principle. Steve Dunbar, one of the first members of AAHE's Peer Review of Teaching project to develop a course portfolio, wrote (in an earlier publication based on that project), "My portfolio is based on seven goals I've identified for students in the course, and my efforts to see whether I can get students to achieve them. . . . I just want to know whether I'm getting through to the students" (1996, 57).

The heart of the course portfolio, its center of gravity, is evidence the teacher gathers about students' learning and development (through the use of classroom assessment techniques, interviews with students, peer review of stu-

dent work, and other strategies described by faculty elsewhere in this volume). Moreover, the decision to develop a portfolio, and the process of putting it together, prompts more frequent and systematic "data points." In case study 2, Donna Martsolf notes,

*The primary benefit for me was the focus on student learning. Weekly student reflections, solicited in order to fill out the portfolio with relevant evidence, have helped me to clarify, and therefore more immediately address and correct, student misconceptions. As a result, student learning has occurred much more quickly this semester than it has in previous semesters. I have evidence that students understand the importance of theoretical thinking in nursing and that this understanding occurred as early as week five for some students and by week eight for all of them. (28)*

Of course, this examination of student learning is also a reflection on the quality of the teacher's work. Indeed, the relationship between student learning and effective teaching — and how to think about making the case for teaching in terms of student learning — has been a central challenge for the AAHE Course Portfolio Working Group, so much so that chapter 5 is wholly dedicated to this question.

### ***A Scholarly Investigation***

A question often asked of a teaching portfolio is, Does the work included fairly represent the teacher's practice? In contrast, the course portfolio is not so much an account of what the teacher typically does as an account of what happens when he or she does something deliberately and explicitly *different*. It is not, that is, a report of what *is* but a purposeful experiment and investigation — a process, if you will, of scholarly inquiry into what *might* be.

This idea of the course portfolio as investigation has become increasingly salient in the work of the faculty members featured in this volume. But it is also a conception that appears in the work of an individual whom many faculty interested in the course portfolio see as its first practitioner, William Cerbin. A professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Cerbin recounts the impetus of his 1992 pioneering foray into the course portfolio precisely around this idea of scholarly investigation and inquiry. It is worth quoting at length:

*Ernest Boyer's Scholarship Reconsidered appeared, and I was very struck by his notion of the scholarship of teaching — and how that notion might take us beyond the old saw that teaching is based on scholarly acumen in one's field, brought to bear in the classroom. I wanted to explore what it was that's scholarly about the teaching I do. . . . I was familiar with teaching portfolios. . . . But thinking about teaching as scholarly inquiry began to lead me in the direction of something I had not seen anyone else doing: a portfolio that focused on the course rather than on all of one's teaching. Being a social scientist, I began to think of each course . . . as a kind of laboratory — not as a truly controlled experiment, of course, but as a setting in which you start out with goals for student learning, then you adopt teaching practices that you think will accomplish these, and along the way*

**"But more than anything else, a constant flow of reflective statements at the start of each section helps clarify for the reader the instructor's conception of the course. Why did I choose to give this particular assignment? Is there a reason why my tests are so long? Do the test results indicate that the students 'got' the material? Without these reflective statements . . . the portfolio becomes simply a dumping ground for every piece of paper generated during the semester, and the reader comes away without a true feeling for the course."**

ELI PASSOW (THIS VOLUME, 71)

*you can watch and see if your practices are helping to accomplish your goals, collecting evidence about effects and impact.*

*In this sense, each course is a kind of discrete entity with a beginning and an end, fairly discrete goals you're trying to accomplish, and, typically, a body of content you're trying to deal with.*

*So the course portfolio was a natural way to go for me, one that followed from my ideas about teaching and learning. I'm not sure I saw this immediately, but one thing I now see is that the course portfolio is really like a scholarly manuscript — not a finished publication, but a manuscript, a draft, of ongoing inquiry. (1996, 52-53)*

## **An Emerging Model of the Course Portfolio**

Like Cerbin, many faculty have become aware of and attracted to the argument that teaching can be seen and undertaken as a scholarly activity. Not by accident, the model of the course portfolio that has gradually emerged from early practice follows and enacts this idea in that its structure is modeled on the analogy of a scholarly project. That is, a well-taught course, like any good scholarly project, can be characterized as having (at a minimum) three elements of *design, enactment or implementation, and results*, as follows:

- 1.** The course begins with significant goals and intentions, which are embodied in its design and expressed in the syllabus and other documents (such as a proposal to a curriculum committee).
- 2.** Those goals and intentions are enacted or carried out in appropriate ways as the course unfolds over the term.
- 3.** And, as a result, certain outcomes emerge: students grasp (or do not) the key ideas/methods/values of the field that shaped the course design and enactment.

While each of the faculty members whose work is featured in this volume takes a slightly different twist on the design of the course portfolio, readers will see that each has more or less followed this three-part structure of design, implementation, and results. In addition, each deals with another topic that is essential to any scholarly project: the "so what" question, the question about the meaning and implications that follow from the investigation. The course portfolio is an occasion for sustained reflective commentary that deals not only with what students learn but also with what the teacher has learned that might contribute to the "community of practice" that he or she belongs to.

This emerging model of the course portfolio has the distinctive advantage of representing the intellectual integrity of teaching. By capturing and analyzing the relationship or congruence *among* design, implementation, and results, it gets at that "more holistic, coherent, integrated aspect of teaching" that Lee Shulman points to as essential.

## Meeting Real Needs

Shulman's opening chapter provides a conceptual rationale for the course portfolio, but it may be useful to note as well four practical functions and needs that the course portfolio can help meet in a rather immediate way.

First, course portfolios are *an aid to memory*. They provide an antidote to the condition that Shulman has dubbed "pedagogical amnesia." Courses, he says, "are a bit like the choruses of songs; you expect to sing them more than once" (Shulman et al. 1996, 2). Indeed, most of us have the hope and expectation that we will teach the course better the next time, having learned from the current experience. And toward that end, we're sure that we'll remember, next year at this point in the course, what worked and didn't in, say, the group reports on the Flannery O'Connor story, or the design project in mechanical engineering, or the exam question about the Federalist Papers. But, somehow, time passes, and the details slip away. Shulman continues,

*There are certain experiences — teaching is one, and people tell me that childbirth is another — in which certain automatic acts of repression immediately follow the experience, wiping out both the painful and sometimes the pleasurable aspects of the experience, but leaving one fresh to try it again. But if we want to learn from teaching, we can't afford the expenses of pedagogical amnesia. And so one purpose of the course portfolio is to serve as a kind of aide de memoire. (2)*

Indeed, for William Cutler, the course portfolio was not only an aid to memory but also, as he writes in case study 1, an aid to perception itself: "So many things occur simultaneously [in a college classroom] that no one person could ever notice, let alone account for them all" (19). Course portfolios encourage a kind of attentiveness, helping to create an archive where memory fails; they assist us as teachers to do that difficult thing: to learn from our own experience.

Second (harkening back to the three features of course portfolios described above), the course portfolio is *an occasion to investigate student learning*: Are my students learning what I think I'm teaching? Are they getting it? Or, to put the question in a more open-ended, investigative way: What *are* they learning? What *sense* are they making of the ideas we attempt to engage them with? What happens to their understanding of the field itself and of themselves as learners of it?

Of course, faculty have always had ways of assessing and keeping track of student learning: papers, projects, exams. But what most have not had is an ongoing habit of and occasion for investigating the student learning experience in depth and over time, looking not only at a column of marks in the grade book but also at messy, important questions . . . for Donna Martsolf, the question of how students progress toward a more abstract concept of nursing and nursing theory . . . for Randy Bass, questions about how hypertext forms of reading and writing can usefully complicate students' understandings of the nature of narrative. The course portfolio is a powerful occasion and prompt for asking important questions about student understandings.

Third, course portfolios are an *escape route from the isolation of the classroom*. Much has been said and written about this isolation. Jane Tompkins wryly likens teaching to sex in this regard: "Teaching, like sex, is something you do

***"I was most interested in making my case to my own colleagues at Kent State University, but I also saw the portfolio as a vehicle for explaining my still fairly unorthodox approach to the teaching of nursing theory to colleagues at the national level. It was my chance to contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning within the professional community."***

DONNA MARTSOLF  
(THIS VOLUME, 27)

alone, although you're always with another person/other people when you do it; . . . and people rarely talk about what the experience is really like for them, partly because, in whatever subculture it is I belong to, there's no vocabulary for articulating the experience and no institutionalized format for doing so" (1990, 656). Lee Shulman (1993) calls the problem "pedagogical solitude."

The good news is that solutions to the problem have begun to emerge: AAHE's *Making Teaching Community Property* (1996) includes reports by faculty about nine strategies designed to make the work that we do as teachers available to one another for discussion, improvement-oriented feedback, and formal review. One of these nine is the course portfolio, which attracted virtually all members of the AAHE Course Portfolio Working Group in large part because of its power to bring us into substantive conversation with others about our work. Such exchange is a matter not simply of meeting a need for a sense of connection and community but of providing a route through which teachers can contribute to and build on the work of others.

Finally, the course portfolio is a way of *bringing recognition and reward to teaching excellence*. As Mary Huber indicates in chapter 3, there is widespread interest in this goal on campuses and in the scholarly societies. The problem is that in many settings the evidence about teaching effectiveness is too paltry, too incomplete, to warrant such recognition and reward. The course portfolio is a step toward richer, more authentic, "situated" portrayals of what teachers know and can do, a significant advance on prevailing practice, which depends almost exclusively on student ratings. These ratings are important but, as Keig and Waggoner (1994) point out, *limited*: "[W]hen faculty and administrators allow student ratings to be the only real source of information about teaching, they unwittingly contribute to a system in which too much emphasis is placed on evaluating superficial teaching skills and not enough is placed on more substantive matters" (1). The aim of portfolios is not, it should be said, to replace student voices but to supplement, complement, round out the picture.

In conclusion, course portfolios are relevant to a number of real needs felt by real educators in their daily practice. They are not a panacea. They are not all figured out or failsafe or without a downside. But they *are* a step in the direction of a scholarly approach to teaching that can profoundly improve our students' learning *and* our own practice in fostering that learning.

## Peer Collaboration and Review of Teaching Practices Main Points

- Teaching circles
- Reciprocal classroom visits and observations
- Mentoring and coaching
- Focus on student learning
- Teaching portfolios and course portfolios
- Team teaching and teaching teams
- Collaborative inquiry and pedagogical scholarship
- Departmental occasions for collaboration, including hiring
- Intercampus collaboration and external peer review

(Hutchings 1996)