

focus

on university teaching and learning

The Teaching Dossier at Dalhousie University

As the process of teaching and learning at university becomes the focus of increasing attention, more and more faculty members are using the teaching dossier as a method for documenting their activities and accomplishments in this area of academic life. While most often compiled for inclusion in a curriculum vitae to be presented to decision-making bodies dealing with issues of employment (appointment, reappointment, tenure and promotion), the teaching dossier also provides faculty members with an opportunity to reflect on their teaching activities in a systematic way. The reflection itself can have a beneficial effect on teaching. In these ways, the teaching dossier can serve to enhance the profile of teaching accomplishments in the evaluation process and to encourage teaching improvement strategies at the individual and departmental levels.

At Dalhousie, there is growing interest in the teaching dossier as a method to achieve both increased recognition of the contribution of faculty members through their teaching activities and enhancement of the pedagogical process. The activities described below are but a few of the ways in which this interest in the teaching dossier is reflected on campus.

At the **departmental level**, responses to a request from the Office of Instructional Development and Technology for information on teaching dossiers suggest fairly widespread acceptance of its use for summative purposes (for personnel decision-making) and indicate a desire for more information on this subject. Departmental experiences differ greatly: some departments actively promote the use of

teaching dossiers in the tenure and promotion process while others have little experience in this area. Overall, however, there appears to be strong support for efforts to provide faculty members with information and guidance in the development and use of the teaching dossier.

The **Dalhousie University Senate Committee on Instructional Development** adopted, after much discussion in the 1989-90 academic year, a "Statement on the Teaching Dossier". The Senate Committee decided to promote the use of

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the teaching dossier as part of a plan to emphasize teaching effectiveness and the value of teaching at Dalhousie University. While the Statement on the Teaching Dossier outlines a number of sources of information, OI DT inquiries made it clear that the most common method of documenting teaching skills at Dalhousie is the use of student ratings of instruction data. The Committee has recently completed a survey of Dalhousie teaching units on the use of student ratings questionnaires

and has adopted a set of guidelines for the administration and use of these instruments based on the information provided by respondents and a review of the literature in the field. While recognizing the important contribution of student rating of instruction data in personnel decision-making and teaching improvement efforts, the Committee cautions against their use as the sole indicator of teaching effectiveness. (A future issue of *Focus on University Teaching and Learning* will be devoted to questions concerning student ratings of instruction.)

The **Office of Instructional Development and Technology** has taken steps to promote the teaching dossier on campus. In August 1990, the Office organized a workshop given by Dr. Christopher Knapper (University of Waterloo), an expert in the field and one of the authors of the CAUT guide to teaching dossiers (copies of which are available at OI DT). The faculty who participated responded very positively to this initiative. The OI DT also has resources available to faculty members interested in preparing a teaching dossier and has begun work on a Dalhousie Guide to the Preparation of the Teaching Dossier. A session on "The Teaching Portfolio: Documenting Teaching and Learning in Higher Education" is part of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Conference hosted by the OI DT at Dalhousie June 15 to 18, 1991.

We hope this bulletin will provide further information concerning the teaching dossier and spark renewed interest in its use as an excellent means of recording teaching accomplishments.

A Statement on the Teaching Dossier

This statement on the teaching dossier was prepared and adopted by the Dalhousie University Senate Committee on Instructional Development. It was submitted for discussion and feedback to the University Senate in 1990 as part of a report on the Committee's activities.

Members of the faculty of Dalhousie University are expected to provide evidence of their teaching effectiveness when being considered for reappointment, tenure and promotion. Teaching is a complex activity, the dynamics and outcomes of which are not easily described on paper.

It is the ongoing responsibility of faculty members to document activities and accomplishments which can be used to build the case for their teaching effectiveness. Such a comprehensive record is commonly called a teaching dossier. One purpose of the dossier is to present information which most fairly and fully reflects teaching activities and accomplishments. The dossier also allows the professor an opportunity for reflection, and this can have a beneficial effect on teaching.

Preparing and maintaining a teaching dossier is a two-part process which involves collection and presentation of materials. Although the two processes must, to some extent, be carried on concurrently, they will be dealt with separately.

The first process involves the collection of information for the teaching dossier. Teaching activities vary from faculty to faculty, department to department, and among different courses and faculty members. Instructional methods and content are, to some extent, discipline-specific, making absolute comparisons both impossible and inappropriate. Based on a review of various teaching dossiers, the Committee proposes the following kinds of material a faculty member may wish to assemble.

First, information from student sources could include student evaluations, input from student committees, statements from present and former students including alumni, and information concerning students supervised.

Second, information from colleagues could include evaluation of teaching and

course materials, as well as evaluation by colleagues of contributions to teaching in the department, university, and the broader community; namely activities such as programme planning, faculty development and curriculum development.

Finally, information from the faculty member could include references to publications (in pedagogical journals, reviews, textbooks); descriptions of courses and learning materials developed; evidence of effective efforts to improve teaching; contributions to teaching through faculty development; programme planning and evaluation; recognition from Dalhousie or other sources concerning teaching accomplishments; awards for teaching; special training in teaching.

"The Teaching Dossier is a comprehensive record of teaching activities and accomplishments drawn up by the professor."

The above list is not intended to be normative or exhaustive. Its purpose is to present a list of the kinds of information from

which faculty members will select the types of information that most clearly reflect their teaching activities. It should be emphasized that multiple sources of information are required to adequately characterize an individual's teaching.

The second process under consideration involves the presentation of teaching activities and accomplishments. The curriculum vitae offers a means of presenting teaching activities by including a summarized form of the teaching dossier. Submission of the curriculum vitae is accompanied by

selected, representative material in the dossier to support the presentation.

Faculty members may wish, when their teaching dossier is to be considered, to submit a letter which highlights and draws attention to specific aspects of their teaching. This letter would help to guide the deliberations of the committee.

As has been the case to date, faculty members must have the opportunity to meet with the evaluating committees at department and faculty levels to discuss any aspects of their teaching performance. This will be particularly important as these committees evolve a method of considering teaching dossier submissions.

The Office of Instructional Development and Technology will develop, publicize, and implement a programme to assist Dalhousie faculty interested in building their teaching dossiers. Encouragement for the development of a comprehensive teaching dossier is consistent with the University's commitment to excellence in its educational offerings and the value Dalhousie places on effectiveness in teaching. Support and advice for Dalhousie faculty engaged in the process of documenting this aspect of their professional accomplishment is therefore an essential University service. It forms part of a plan to emphasize teaching effectiveness and the value of teaching.

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How to Create a Teaching Dossier

This material is from Bruce M. Shore, Stephen F. Foster, Christopher K. Knapper, Gilles G. Nadeau, Neill Neill, Victor W. Sim, and with the help of faculty members of the Centre for Teaching and Learning Services, McGill University. *The Teaching Dossier: A Guide to its Preparation and Use*. Revised Edition, 1986. Ottawa: Canadian Association of University Teachers.

Step 1: Clarify teaching responsibilities:

There often exists between colleagues an informal understanding concerning teaching responsibilities and criteria for teaching success. The first step in preparing the teaching dossier is to summarize these understandings in a short paragraph or two. Points covered might include understandings about the numbers and types of courses to be taught, how students are to be evaluated, and the nature of progress expected by students. Where such an understanding does not exist, the consequence can be arbitrary and shifting evaluation criteria. Where there is no informal understanding the professor should include a brief statement of his or her own assumptions concerning responsibilities and obligations.

Step 2: Select criteria for effective teaching:

The List of Possible Items for a Teaching Dossier is examined. Paying particular attention to the statement in Step 1, the professor selects those items which are most applicable to his or her assigned teaching responsibilities and prepares a statement about accomplishments in each area. Item choice should also accommodate the professor's personal preferences and teaching style.

Step 3: Order the criteria:

The statements are arranged in the order which best fits their intended use. For example, if the professor is trying to demonstrate improvement in teaching, entries that in the short run lead to improvements would be emphasized.

Step 4: Compile back-up evidence:

Copies of all printed items referred to in the dossier should be kept by the professor. These would include such things as examination papers, original replies to course evaluation questionnaires*, letters from [chair] and students and samples of student work. These materials are not part of the dossier, but are back-up information in case "original" evidence is required. [Official summaries are in order for summative evaluations.]

Step 5: Incorporate dossier into curriculum vitae:

The professor inserts the completed dossier into the CV under the heading "Teaching" or "Instruction". Precisely where it is placed in the CV in relation to the sections on scholarship and service should reflect the relative place of teaching among the professor's university responsibilities.

Step 6: (Optional) Add exemplary materials:

When the professor submits the updated CV to a promotion and tenure committee, the CV may be accompanied by a few pages of material which illustrate some of the major evidence referred to. An exemplary course outline, or reading list, an examination keyed to objectives, a numerical summary of student course evaluations or unsolicited letters of praise from students might be well worth including with the CV. The advisability of this step depends very much on local customs, but is likely to be especially important when a professor is confronting a major career decision, such as tenure and promotion.

Some Common Pitfalls

Experience and hindsight can help us avoid misconceptions and errors in practice. Seldin and Annis offer this list of "don'ts"

Don't Use the Teaching Portfolio Alone for Personnel Decisions. The professor's role is multi-faceted and the teaching portfolio covers only one, albeit very important, facet. Insert it into the professor's curriculum vitae under the heading "teaching".

Don't Discard Supportive Evidence. It must be safeguarded by the professor. Such evidence might include original student evaluations of teaching*, invitations to contribute articles on improving teaching performance, student workbooks or field reports. The professor should give written assurance in the portfolio that such support data are available for review upon request.

*[The appropriate material to keep at Dalhousie would be the summaries of student ratings received by the professor since the compilation of data should be done by someone "at arm's length," i.e., by someone other than the professor.]

Don't Assume That [All] Professors And Administrators Will Immediately Embrace the Portfolio Concept. Unfortunately, at many institutions there is a disturbing xenophobia toward strangers bearing new ideas. The portfolio concept is no exception. Their resistance can best be overcome by open and candid discussions and by field-testing the portfolio on a handful of prestigious professors. [At Dalhousie, there are already many professors and departments using the teaching portfolio or dossier successfully. OIDD can, however, provide advice on how to introduce the teaching dossier in a given department.]

Don't Presume That The Time It Takes To Prepare A Teaching Portfolio Outweighs Its Benefits. Preparing the portfolio does not consume an unreasonable amount of time. In fact, it usually takes no more than a few days to put together. And on the plus side, the benefits are considerable.

Peter Seldin and Linda F. Annis. *The Teaching Portfolio, The Journal of Staff, Program & Organization Development* v. 8, n.4, Winter 1990, pp. 197-201.

Perspectives on Teaching and the Teaching Dossier

Those reluctant to adopt the teaching dossier concept may evoke various academic traditions to support their resistance. Promoters of the teaching dossier concept, on the other hand, propose a stance in support of this technique designed to focus on effective university teaching. "Resisting" and "Changing" detail the opposing positions.

Resisting

1. We are not self-promoters
2. We do not need defensive documentation
3. Our deeds speak for themselves.
4. Recording time bites into accomplishing time.
5. Teaching is not always our priority.
6. Our teaching domain priorities are:
 - a) the act of teaching
 - b) improving teaching abilities
 - c) documenting accomplishment.
7. We have not been trained to document these aspects of our work.
8. We have felt no great pressure to improve in this area.

Changing

1. We must produce better evidence of our professional contributions.
2. We need positive documentation to delineate our accomplishments.
3. Our role has to be expressed and communicated clearly to those outside our immediate fields.
4. Successfully reporting our results will help obtain better conditions for greater achievement
5. Our career choice necessitates a certain accent on the teaching component of our professional activity.
6. Our attention to all aspects of our teaching profiles will lead to more harmonious development in this field.
7. We must seek ways to effectively present evidence of teaching strengths
8. Our early initiatives will reduce potential pressures to produce evidence of excellent performance under more difficult circumstances.



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