

# focus

on university teaching and learning

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## Recording Teaching Accomplishment

*For five days in August fifteen university professors gathered at Dalhousie University to reflect on and write about their teaching. The first annual Recording Teaching Accomplishment Institute, organized by the Office of Instructional Development and Technology, provided participants from Dalhousie, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and universities in Ontario, Maine, and Connecticut an opportunity to assemble a personal teaching dossier with the advice and guidance of facilitators Alan Wright and Carol O'Neil. Through a combination of workshops, individual consultations, and interactions with other participants, these educators were able to create a record of their teaching activities, goals, and accomplishments. Their remarks on the dossier development experience are interspersed in bold face print throughout this issue of Focus which deals with the methods and benefits of documenting teaching performance.*



Institute participants (standing, left to right) Colleen Hood, Cynthia Taylor, Walter Kimball, Nigel Kemp, Robert Doyle, Rusty Neal, Janice MacInnis (OIDT), Barbara Brown. Seated are Sabah Metlej, Deborah Hobson (Vice-President, Academic and Research), Alan Wright (OIDT), Carol O'Neil (OIDT), and Rhona Free. (Six participants are missing from photo)

The standard definition of the teaching dossier—a comprehensive record of teaching activities and accomplishments drawn up by the professor—is somewhat misleading. It fails to convey the exciting developmental potential which is the primary underlying rationale for engaging in the process of preparing an account of one's teaching.

The teaching dossier is now commonly used to assess individual performance: as a part of the evidence presented to make a case for appointment, tenure or promotion or for an award for teaching excellence. As such, it serves as a method of gate-keeping: of establishing the professional effectiveness of the applicant.

**"I realize the teaching dossier is becoming increasingly important to the promotion process at Dalhousie—I am up for promotion this year and will need to present a teaching dossier."**

Requiring faculty members to document and personnel committees to evaluate teaching performance also helps to raise the profile of teaching and to ensure that good teaching is recognized and rewarded.<sup>1</sup> Those seeking advancement will thus be encouraged to develop their pedagogical skills. According to Harry Murray of the University of Western Ontario, "All you have to do is ensure that evaluation of teaching counts in the institutional reward system, and faculty members will do a lot of 'self-development'" (1993, p. 86). The impact on the system as a whole will occur cumulatively, beginning with individuals and ultimately permeating the academy. But this view of the teaching dossier as a descriptive device used solely to determine rewards (summative evaluation) places the onus for system-change on those entering and progressing through the ranks of the professoriate and does not tap the dossier's full potential as a developmental tool.

**"I am preparing for a tenure hearing. This helped me build a frame, and I wrote it to represent me rather than just to meet the needs of a committee. It was useful to focus on course development and tie the philosophy [of teaching] to the development. I now have a frame with which to evaluate myself in the coming year."**

Articulated more often is a broader notion of the teaching dossier which has even greater potential for enhancing teaching and learning. In this formulation, the dossier is, in addition to a record of teaching accomplishments over time, a reflective document which provides an opportu-

nity for teachers to systematically explore various elements of their pedagogy with a view to improvement: a tool for formative evaluation.

**"I benefitted from reflecting on my own teaching experiences and knowing my skills and setting a philosophy of teaching. What was most beneficial was learning from others' opinions and skills, and setting further goals."**

The American Association for Higher Education makes a case for developing teaching dossiers (or portfolios as they are called in the US) based on four propositions:

1. *Teaching dossiers "can capture the intellectual substance and 'situated-ness' of teaching in ways that other methods of evaluation cannot. . . . Faculty can present evidence and reflection about their teaching in ways that keep this evidence and reflection connected to the particulars of what is being taught to whom under what conditions"* (Edgerton, Hutchings, & Quinlan, 1991, p. 4). A list of courses taught and textbooks used or an evaluator's classroom visit are but "snapshots" or samples of a teacher's work. Dossiers allow these samples to be presented within a broader context: within a document which not only describes what one does, but the *raison d'être* and outcomes of one's teaching.

**"An extremely positive, thought-provoking experience. It served to clarify, and at times validate, my efforts in teaching. I feel that someone will be able to see the effort, energy, and care I put into my teaching. . . ."**

2. *Dossiers "place responsibility for evaluating teaching in the hands of faculty. . . . [They] encourage faculty to take important, new roles in the documentation, observation, and review of teaching"* (p. 5). All too often, only a few sources of third-party evidence (like student ratings of instruction, isolated classroom observations, and testimonial letters) are the usual means of determining teaching effectiveness. Faculty are thus put in the position of evaluating (and being evaluated) based on others' perceptions. Teaching dossiers provide an opportunity for teachers to display and explain a wide range of primary evidence which allows faculty colleagues to judge for themselves things like course organization, relevance and currency of content, relationship to departmental or programme goals, learning objectives and outcomes, etc. Everyone is engaged in defining the characteristics of good teaching and deciding what forms of evidence are most compelling.

## Evaluating Teaching Dossiers

Whether developed for summative or formative purposes, each teaching dossier will be unique—a reflection of the particular teaching context, style, and personality of the professor.

In general, though, teaching dossiers usually contain:

- *A Summary of Teaching Responsibilities*
- *A Reflective Statement on Teaching Philosophy, Practices, and Goals*

Also included could be explanatory statements about and appended work samples of any of the following:

- *Course Development and Modification*
- *Products of Good Teaching: Evidence of Student Learning*
- *Description of Steps Taken to Evaluate and Improve One's Teaching*
- *Contributions to Teaching (in the department, institution, or profession)*
- *Evidence of Teaching Effectiveness from Students, Colleagues, and Others*

When the teaching dossier is used for personnel decisions, some elements may be mandated, others suggested. For example, under the terms of the collective agreement between the Board of Governors and the Dalhousie Faculty Association, one can be considered for promotion to full professor based on having "attained a high level of effectiveness in teaching" that "represents a significant contribution to [the] discipline or to the University." The candidate must submit peer and/or student evaluations of teaching. Among other types of evidence which may be presented are:

- development of new courses
- updating of existing courses
- effective use of innovative teaching aids and techniques
- development of innovative teaching aids and techniques
- involvement in curriculum development
- organization of field schools, laboratories or clinical practica
- successful direction of the research of . . . students
- successful public and/or continuing education activities
- publication or production of books, articles, films or recordings which elucidate and advance teaching effectiveness
- formal recognition as an excellent teacher (pp. 37-38)

**"My lifelong interest in teaching—as an art form—has led me to the conviction that teachers should take pride in and acknowledge their teaching practice. This [Institute] will bring focused attention to personal accomplishments and help teachers to realize their ability and interest. How do I initiate real, abiding interest? How do I initiate fine conversation (amongst colleagues) in the teaching process?"**

3. *Teaching dossiers "can promote more reflective practice and improvement"* (p. 6). The development of a teaching dossier requires that an instructor clarify teaching goals and examine activities and outcomes in light of these goals, displaying "the thoughts behind the actions." This process can reveal inconsistencies or suggest alternatives and provide the motivation for change. As well, faculty colleagues can learn more about one another's teaching and become motivated themselves to engage in the reflective process and in discussions about teaching.

**"This process was meaningful for me. I am relatively new, and had not thought deeply about teaching. This process has helped me to define who I am as a teacher and why I do what I do. I thought I had no teaching techniques, but you helped me list 25 of them. It was a very validating experience, it made me realize the philosophy drives what we're doing."**

4. *Dossiers "can foster a culture of teaching and a new discourse about it"* (p. 6). The use of the teaching dossier for both summative and formative purposes can have a significant impact on the institutional environment by encouraging a collective commitment to teaching and to the scholarship of teaching.

**"Mentoring, sharing, exchange, and review of our teaching is so important. I found the mentoring with [OIDT] staff and [conferring] with peers to be vital."**

This, then, is the real potential for change represented by the teaching dossier. As Edgerton, Hutchings, & Quinlan put it,

What excites us about this image, and informs our view of what the portfolio might contain, is its potential for fostering the creation of a culture in which thoughtful discourse about teaching becomes the norm. (p. 4)

The August, 1995, issue of the Dalhousie Faculty Association's *DFA Dialogue* provides an excellent summary of the appointment, tenure, and promotion process. It also tells where to get more information on any additional policies or requirements in force in a given Faculty.

Whether evaluating one's own or a colleague's teaching as documented in a dossier, it is important to begin by developing a set of criteria by which to measure performance. A series of general questions can help to structure the overall evaluation of the evidence presented in the dossier. For example: Are there clearly stated and agreed-upon expectations about the professor's teaching responsibilities? Are the teaching goals described in the dossier consonant with good practice and with the goals of the department and the institution? Are teaching activities consistent with the stated goals? (See the "Sample Questions . . ." in the Insert.)

The literature on higher education should also be used to guide the evaluation process. Research findings on the characteristics of effective teachers and on what constitutes good teaching practice provide a standard against which to measure performance. (See the Insert.)

The staff of the Office of Instructional Development and Technology has considerable experience with teaching dossiers through our work with individuals, our presentations and workshops at universities, colleges, and professional associations in Canada and the US, and our publications. We have seen that developing a teaching dossier can have a powerful effect on teachers who are encouraged to continue the process of information collection and reflection which provide the motivation and insight necessary for improved practice. The teaching dossier gives faculty an opportunity to use their considerable research and analytic skills in order to improve teaching and learning. Let's not limit its use to applicants for tenure or promotion.

**"I believe that the process of developing a Teaching Dossier is as important as its contents. As a result of . . . this exercise it has become clear just how powerful a tool in fostering individual growth and development the dossier is. It is more than the collection of evidence of teaching accomplishment, it also facilitates self-reflection, assessment, analysis, and the re-setting of goals."**

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<sup>1</sup> Faculty developers in Canada, UK, US, and Australasia and faculty and administrators at seven Atlantic Canadian universities agree: they ranked 'the recognition of teaching in tenure and promotion decisions' the highest of thirty-six practices in terms of the potential to improve teaching on their campuses (Wright, W.A. & O'Neil, M.C., 1995).

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## Characteristics of Effective Teaching

- Good organization of subject matter and course
- Effective communication
- Knowledge of the subject matter and teaching
- Enthusiasm for the subject matter and for teaching
- Flexibility in approaches to teaching
- Rapport with and a positive attitude toward students
- Fairness in examination and grading
- Appropriate student learning outcomes

(Adapted from Centra *et al.* 1987, pp. 5-6)

## Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education

### 1. Good Practice Encourages Student-Faculty Contact

Frequent student-faculty contact in and out of classes is the most important factor in student motivation and involvement. Knowing a few faculty members well enhances students' intellectual commitment and encourages them to think about their own values and future plans.

### 2. Good Practice Encourages Cooperation Among Students

Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated. Sharing one's own ideas and responding to others' reactions improves thinking and deepens understanding.

### 3. Good Practice Encourages Active Learning

Students must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves.

### 4. Good Practice Gives Prompt Feedback

Knowing what you know and don't know focuses student learning. Students need appropriate feedback on performance to benefit from courses. At various points, students need chances to reflect on what they have learned, what they still need to know, and how to assess themselves.

### 5. Good Practice Emphasizes Time on Task

Learning to use one's time well is critical for students and professionals alike. Allocating realistic amounts of time means effective learning for students and effective teaching for faculty.

### 6. Good Practice Communicates High Expectations

Expect more and you will get it. High expectations are important for everyone. Expecting students to perform well becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when teachers and institutions hold high expectations for themselves and make extra efforts.

### 7. Good Practice Respects Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning

There are many roads to learning. Students need the opportunity to show their talents and learn in ways that work for them. Then they can be pushed to learning in new ways that do not come so easily.

(Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1989, p. 11)

## Sample Questions for Evaluation of Course Material

### *Course description*

- Are the course objectives in keeping with the mission of the department's curriculum?
- Do these objectives complement—rather than needlessly replicate—related courses in the department or in other departments?
- Does this course prepare students for more advanced work in this field?
- Is this material valuable and worth knowing?
- Is the content appropriately challenging for the students?
- Is the course well organized? Are the topics logically sequenced?
- Does each topic receive adequate attention relative to other topics?

### *Reading Lists, Course Readers, and Textbooks*

- Are the assigned readings intellectually challenging?
- Do the texts represent the best work in the field?
- Do they offer a diversity of up-to-date views?
- Are the reading assignments appropriate in level and length for the course?

### *Exams and Quizzes*

- Are tests consistent with the course objectives?
- Do they give students a fair opportunity to demonstrate knowledge?
- Do tests focus on important aspects of the subject matter?
- Do they adequately cover the subject matter?
- Are test items well written, unambiguous, and not overcued?
- Are there questions that assess students' abilities to apply concepts as well as questions that test students' memory?
- Are tests routinely revised each time the instructor offers the course?

### *Grading Assignments and Exams*

- Is grading fair and consistent?
- Are the standards for grading clearly communicated to students?
- Are these standards reasonable for this particular course? Are they consonant with department standards?
- Does the instructor write constructive comments on papers and tests?

### *Assignments and Homework*

- Are assignments effectively coordinated with the syllabus and well integrated into the course?
- Do they provide challenging and meaningful experiences for students?
- Do they give students opportunities to apply concepts and demonstrate their understanding of the subject?
- Are they appropriate in frequency and length?

Braskamp, Larry A. & Ory, John C. 1994. *Assessing faculty work: Enhancing individual and institutional performance*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.