

# Putting the Focus on Student Learning

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CHAPTER

5

There are many activities that faculty members can engage in to develop their teaching. Attending workshops on teaching techniques, videotaping classes, and consulting with specialists are all useful ways to work on teaching; many faculty also find that there are benefits derived from the creation of a teaching portfolio. Given this array of options, one might ask, What is distinctive about the course portfolio as one among many development activities? This volume answers that question in a variety of ways and voices. My argument in *this* chapter is that the major benefit of the course portfolio lies in uncovering how effectively the course goals for student learning are being met. In what follows, I will discuss the importance of this focus on student learning, as well as the issues and challenges this focus raises for those developing course portfolios.

## An Interaction Between Teaching and Learning

The lens of the teaching portfolio focuses nicely on the teacher. By contrast, a course portfolio is a wide-angle lens that includes learner performance as well as teacher performance, and the relation between them is at the center of the picture. In this wide-angle view of optimal teaching, learners acquire deeper understanding as a result of teaching, and teaching practices evolve as a function of their success in generating understanding. The distinctive focus of the course portfolio is in revealing how teacher practice and student performance are connected with each other.

A focus on the interaction of performance and results is not unique to teaching; it is also characteristic of the documentation of research and professional outreach. In a research article or consultant's report, one would rarely find an account of the scholar's work without a description of its results, and the report would certainly claim a connection between the activity and those results. Moreover, excellence in the domains of research and applied scholarship is characterized by flexibility and adaptability in matching performance to intended outcomes. A skillful researcher might, that is, adjust her or his approach on the basis of preliminary results; a consultant who does not at first obtain satisfactory results in a service setting makes adjustments so as to achieve the desired outcome. And so it is with excellent teaching: If learners are not reaching a deep understanding of the material, the teacher makes adjustments in order to more fully meet course goals. Indeed, such a transactional relation is a benchmark of excellence in scholarly practice.

## The Assessment Imperative

In work on my own campus and beyond, I find many faculty today who concur that good teaching is about this "transactional relation" to learning. Where things get difficult is in their knowing whether and how deeply students are actually understanding course material and reaching course goals — which is where assessment comes in.

***"I wanted to hold my own feet to the fire, using the portfolio to look much more closely at whether and how my decisions about course design and conduct actually contributed to student learning."***

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On the one hand, assessment is familiar ground to faculty; all of us gather evidence about student learning and evaluate that evidence in order to provide feedback — and to give grades. On the other hand, new, sometimes daunting models for assessment have been increasingly in the air in the past decade. There are now a number of national and regional conferences, growing examples of campus practice, and an impressive array of literature that readers can turn to (see for instance, Angelo and Cross 1993; McMillan 1988; Walvoord and Anderson 1998; Wiggins 1998; Wiske 1998), some of it proposing quite radical departures from the kinds of assessment that faculty have traditionally engaged in. Proponents of "authentic assessment" argue, for instance, that the traditional course examination is a rarified form of human behavior; that there are very few real-life situations in which a person is called upon to work alone and without access to source materials to produce a written answer to an abstract hypothetical question within a specified and usually brief timeframe. Critics of traditional assessment (e.g., Perkins 1992; Wiske 1998) suggest that learning and understanding should be measured by putting students into appropriate and complex situations requiring them to collaborate with other people, integrate knowledge and critical skills from several specific domains, analyze competing contextual constraints, and put a workable plan into effect. This vision of assessment has a clear and intuitive appeal for many teachers; we recognize that it would be terrific if learners who have read our assignments, done our problems, and listened to our analyses actually brought those inputs together in a productive way when called upon to do so. But of course all of this is easier said than done.

In short, not all faculty are ready to jump with both feet into all the latest models of assessment. But the literature on assessment, and its evolving practice, has much to teach those of us attempting to develop course portfolios. Indeed, the benefit of the course portfolio is not that it transforms one into an education specialist but that it makes visible the need for and power of information about student learning.

### **Building Assessment Into the Course Portfolio**

As Pat Hutchings noted in chapter 4, one of the puzzling elements for most faculty developing a portfolio is how to represent student learning; that is, how to build in the process of assessment. The four suggestions that follow derive both from the general literature on assessment (as noted above) and from the experience of faculty who have actually developed course portfolios:

*Focus on the match between assessment and course goals.* While it may seem obvious, assessment should focus on the kinds of learning the course aims to produce. Many a faculty member has discovered after the fact that poor student performance likely resulted from teaching to one kind of understanding while expecting learners to produce a different kind. I had a colleague who was very proud that he never asked on a test anything that he had explicitly taught in the class. He could give a very articulate explanation of the importance of generalized understandings, and the need for students to use ideas and tools in new contexts beyond what has been taught. Unfortunately, his course did not have any planned strategy for promoting those generalized skills in students.

My colleague was also proud that few of his students earned top grades; very few learners in his course acquired those conceptual skills he so lovingly measured. A course portfolio would have placed this circumstance — a mismatch between ambition and result — in the foreground, leading to a consideration of the relation among goals (well articulated), measures (appropriate to the goal of generalization), and methods of instruction (not directed toward abstract skills).

To put it differently, the course portfolio is a kind of self-discipline that can prompt faculty to examine the all-important relation of the skills intended, the skills being taught, and the skills that are ultimately assessed.

*Use existing assessment data whenever possible.* Many faculty upon first encountering “student outcomes assessment,” whether in the context of a mandate from an accrediting association or the development of a course portfolio, assume that what is needed is something wholly new and different, something they do not already do or know how to do. In fact, as pointed out above, all faculty assess student work, and the generation of a course portfolio can be made a less daunting task if the evidence of student learning comes from activities that take place as a regular part of the course. The grading of examinations and other assignments is, for example, an important form of assessment, and a course portfolio would certainly include examples and summary data from those existing measures of student understanding. Reflection on the evidence might, admittedly, involve some new time, but gathering evidence about student learning should be a regular process of conducting the course.

At the same time, readers may be struck, as I am, by the case studies included in this volume, virtually all of which report that the decision to undertake a course portfolio brought with it an awareness that more and better evidence about student learning was needed. Thus, while “existing evidence” is good grist for a course portfolio, many faculty developing one find themselves exploring new assessment strategies that can give a richer picture of student learning.

*Include a variety of kinds of evidence.* There are many ways that faculty learn how much of the course material students understand. While the formal assessment (course examinations, major papers, projects, etc.) that goes into the records of a course is certainly important, a course portfolio can also take advantage of “trace materials” from other assessments that are used in a primarily diagnostic or formative way. As documented by Angelo and Cross (1993), classroom assessment strategies can give instructors an image of student understanding without their scheduling examinations or grading homework assignments. The “minute paper” is perhaps the best-known example; students are asked in class to write anonymous, brief (i.e., “minute”) statements of what they do or do not understand about topics in the course, giving the instructor a read on their grasp of key ideas before the next meeting. A class journal can also serve this purpose. A faculty member I recently talked with described her use of a “dialogic journal,” which she keeps in an accessible place in the classroom and in which she and members of the class write regularly about how things are going, why, what changes might be useful, and so forth. Similar information could be gleaned from a Web-based chatroom that can be

**"I included (1) a longitudinal case study of a single student's progress through the course; (2) a range of final student work . . . from two A students, one B student, and one C student; and (3) data sets from periodic anonymous classroom assessment from all students."**

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accessed continuously by students and teacher alike. Yet another source of useful feedback is the "Small Group Instructional Diagnosis," in which I would invite a colleague to my class (I meanwhile would leave) to lead the students through a series of questions about how the class is going (Braskamp and Ory 1994). All of these informal, and quite simple, low-stakes assessments can provide material for a course portfolio. Indeed, a number of the portfolios described in this volume include such information as an important part of their picture of the student learning experience.

*Be purposeful about selecting evidence about student learning.* In case study 4, Orin Chein reports on his efforts to prune the voluminous amount of student work he included in the first draft of his portfolio. He puzzles over how much to include, and how to select an appropriate and credible subset of the fuller collection. He is of course correct that there is no reason to include in a course portfolio all the student performance that takes place in a class; doing so only overwhelms the reader. And he is also correct that actual samples of student performance are a key element of the course portfolio.

Fortunately, there are several strategies for selecting examples of student performance. On my campus, for instance, we are piloting a strategy whereby faculty identify randomly on the first day of class a manageable number of students (for example, seven or 10) whose work is then collected and tracked throughout the semester. The idea is to create an archive of specific examples (work that is graded and commented upon) that can be used to investigate and illustrate changes in student understanding during the semester. In combination with a grade roster that shows the distribution of performances for *all* students, this sample gives rich meaning to the range of student understanding in the course. It also allows an in-depth study of the evolution of individual students' work as they progress through the course. The longitudinal development of individual understanding is a window into teaching and learning that might well find a place in a course portfolio; indeed, Pat Hutchings's portfolio contains one longitudinal case study of this type.

An alternative to tracking individual students over time is to select completed work on key assignments and assessments. This might mean selecting "benchmark performances," displaying the best work achieved as an index of the potential quality of the experience. It might mean selecting a range of work: two excellent, two average, two unsatisfactory. Readers can then get a sense of the teacher's goals and standards.

The main point here is that readers do not need (and probably cannot bear) to see all of the work done in a course, and the course portfolio is a means for the instructor to organize levels of learner understanding and make them apparent to readers of the portfolio. As in other forms of scholarly writing, the presenter gives a full representation of ideas without asking readers to repeat all of the observations that led to the conclusion.

### **The Substance of Assessment: What Learning Do We Care About?**

The four suggestions above speak primarily to issues of process; my aim is to address questions that faculty routinely ask when trying to represent student

learning as part of a course portfolio. But what many faculty also want guidance with is the *substance* of assessment: What should be assessed? What knowledge and skills are most important? This chapter is not the place to lay the question to rest. Indeed, there is no universally accepted, standard set of outcomes, and it would be inappropriate to treat any of the models found in the teaching literature as sacred text, with faculty striving to assess only at the highest level or trying to include every category in an author's index of skills. What can be said, however, is that it is important to *assess a range of skills*, and not only those that are simplest for us to measure or easiest for students to master. And it might, therefore, be helpful to lay out a sort of typology of skills and learning.

### ***Relatively Concrete Material***

Most courses introduce learners to a variety of new information — vocabulary, facts, intellectual conventions common to the field, procedures essential to its conduct, and so forth. When I teach about the acquisition of language in a course about learning, I want students to know what Chomsky means by “language organ.” Faculty teaching poetry want students to know that a sonnet has 14 lines. In a chemistry class, students need to learn the basic safety protocols for conducting a lab. Though the teaching of facts has rightly been taken to task in some circles, the grasp of relatively concrete material is part of what it means to know the field. Thus, it is entirely appropriate that the assessment included in a course (and documented in a course portfolio) include measures of students' facility with this kind of information — which is, after all, the raw material of the field.

### ***Application and Comparison***

Most faculty, teaching most courses, also value a number of skills in a medium range of conceptual difficulty. These include, for instance, the ability to make relationships among ideas or observations; assessments at this level might ask students to “compare and contrast” two love sonnets, or two phenomena related to language acquisition. Another approach is through questions that ask for application of a procedure or analytical tool in a new context. Students might be asked how ideas or tools apply to newly provided raw material; they might be asked which of the many analytic tools previously learned is most useful to a new context. The main difference from the more concrete level is that the students use ideas in some way, demonstrating a more active intellectual role that goes beyond recognition of a term or idea.

### ***Synthesis and Evaluation***

At the advanced level of understanding in any field we might look for some form of new or evaluative use of ideas by a learner. Here faculty might ask students to combine ideas and raw material that were presented separately, working to find some conclusion that can only be drawn when the two are considered together. Synthesis of this kind is a form of scholarship highly valued in many disciplines, and recognizing connections among observations and phenomena is a source of intellectual creativity. Another form of advanced under-

standing involves the evaluation of alternative perspectives or arguments. If they understand the conventions of evidence or analysis in a field, learners should be able to explain how they would evaluate which of several alternative positions provides the best account of some of the raw material in a field. Like application, this is a form of using the tools of a discipline, but it is a more complex form in that multiple options are available to be analyzed and considered.

### Learning as a Test of Teaching

This chapter — and indeed much of this volume — argues that questions about the effectiveness of teaching cannot be answered without reference to learning; that learning is, if you will, the test of teaching. I endorse this formulation, but I would like to conclude by saying a bit about the realities of its enactment — be it through course portfolios or some other vehicle.

In this, I am reminded of a section of Randy Bass's portfolio entitled "Learning: A Narrative Analysis." It is, he says, his "stab at the question of teaching effectiveness in light of impact on student learning." He reviews a number of examples of student online projects, citing evidence that course goals have been met in some cases, while in others uncovering "lingering concerns." But in a related section, entitled "The Burden of Proof," he also enters an important caveat:

*I found myself asking a larger question regarding the burden of proof on any single course to demonstrate learning outcomes, let alone a course working with new tools and approaches that are not to be found elsewhere in a curriculum. Most of what we expect from any given course is contextualized by the recurrence of those same skills or approaches in other courses. Ideally, any major curriculum is characterized by certain common methods and conceptual tools across a course of study. . . . [W]hile there are some things that I can do [to promote student learning] one truism will remain: An anomalous course in the curriculum will always be limited in its impact. By this, I simply mean that what can be accomplished in one course is completely different from what could be accomplished if students were encountering some of these skills across several courses. (this volume, 95)*

Bass's point is a crucial one for those of us interested in course portfolios and other new ways of representing teaching and learning (and especially where such documentation will be used for personnel decisions). Though we might well want to emphasize the importance of impact on student learning, it is impossible for any individual instructor to claim sole responsibility for the learning that takes place during his or her course. Educational settings simply do not allow for the sort of experimental method that would enable us to make such claims. And of course we all know that student effort, prior preparation, and the simple passage of time have a good deal to do with student growth in our classes — more, sometimes, than our teaching per se.

On the other hand, the course portfolio can put a focus on student learning in a more modest but very powerful way. While one might not claim that the teaching of the course is the exclusive cause of student learning, a portfolio can help faculty show where the course experience *contributed* to student growth.

This case is often best made by a longitudinal account, showing how learners' understanding changed over the unfolding of the course and showing those forms of identified good teaching practice that were included during that time. For example, one might document the evolution of a learner's understanding by alternating samples of performance with samples of the feedback given and instruction offered. The sequence of events documented gives a plausible account of the growth of understanding.

One might also use evidence of learning to identify a trajectory of performance. If a clear benchmark of quality student learning is identified, an instructor might measure learner understanding against that benchmark in successive semesters, noting that each successive class is moving progressively closer to it. Evidence of such a trajectory of class performance across offerings would be strong support for improvement on the teacher's part.

In this sense, the course portfolio model, with its focus on student learning as feedback to help instructors develop their teaching methods, is completely congruent with the framework in *Scholarship Assessed*, in which teaching is considered a form of scholarly work in which excellence is gauged in part — not exclusively — by looking at results in terms of understandings achieved by students. Excellent teaching is, by this measure, a process of ongoing, purposeful reflection on the relation between teaching practice and learner success. It is this process that the course portfolio is distinctly able to capture.