Guide to Preparing your Teaching Dossier

Last updated: May 7, 2021

University of Victoria
Learning and
Teaching Support
and Innovation

Prepared by:
Dr. Cynthia Korpan, Director, Teaching Excellence

For: Laurene Sheilds, Executive Director

Contents

At the University of Victoria, the processes of annual reviews, tenure, and promotion require faculty to submit teaching dossiers— personalized collections of materials that document teaching effectiveness—along with their CV and annual reports. In addition, the teaching dossier is necessary for applying for a new academic position and for being considered for a teaching award. While many faculties are already aware of the need for such a dossier and have prepared them, some are still unclear as to what exactly a teaching dossier is and what it should contain. The aim of this guide is to answer these questions and to help you to create your own personalized dossier, consistent with the UVic guidelines.

This guide begins with information, thought-provoking questions, and exercises to assist you in developing your teaching identity so that you can confidently write the most important part of the dossier — the teaching statement. It then moves onto discussion of the different components that you can begin gathering for your dossier in easy-to-follow steps. First, read through the whole document and then return to Step 1 to begin.

What is a teaching dossier?

A teaching dossier…

- is sometimes called a portfolio, which contains documentation about your experience as an instructor (this means as a teaching assistant (TA), guest lecturer, or other instructional roles, such as a being a volunteer instructor or organizing experiential learning in the community).
- begins with a teaching statement or philosophy1 (described below) that includes your approach to teaching, explanation of why this is important to you, and illustrative strategies you use in your teaching.
- is the compendium of all of your evidence (in appendices) to support your teaching statement (see below for details about what to include in a teaching dossier).
- is not the place to list all of the teaching you have ever done (do not repeat what is in your curriculum vitae or other areas of the report).

Though there is no specifically recognized format, the teaching dossier typically consists of two basic components: a teaching narrative statement, which is a short reflective narrative (two to three pages), and appendices, which consists of supporting documentation.

1. The teaching narrative statement is a reflective narrative, a key piece of your teaching dossier that makes a case for your teaching contributions based on your approach to teaching. The teaching statement triangulates your approach to teaching with evidence from colleagues and students that support your approach. You will need to use specific examples that narrate your approach and refer to evidence that supports your approach.
2. Supporting materials/data/documents constitute the evidence that illustrates and supports your approach to teaching in your reflective narrative statement. The supporting materials are most conveniently located in well organized and paginated appendices. Points made in the teaching narrative statement should be directed to specific pages or parts of the appendices to show examples and evidence where possible.
3. Starting a teaching narrative statement is very challenging and often leads to generic statements and educational jargon, rather than a personal statement of concrete approaches that reflect your unique strengths. To facilitate an authentic teaching narrative, it is helpful to begin with some reflection.

---

[1] The terms teaching statement or teaching philosophy statement are often used interchangeably. In this document, term 'statement' is used.

Step 1: Being reflective

Whether you have a lot of teaching experience or very little, the first step is to think about teaching in higher education by reflecting on your responses to the following questions. It often helps to answer them with reference either to the course you have enjoyed teaching the most, or the course you have taught most often.

1. What values and beliefs do you hold about learning and teaching? By answering this question, you want to understand the underlying values and beliefs that you bring to the teaching role. Once you are aware of these values and beliefs, then you can think about how they affect your teaching and student learning.
2. What do you think are important characteristics in students? Why are these important to you? What if a student does not have one of these characteristics? How does that affect your interactions with them?
3. What is your approach to teaching? (What sets you apart as a teacher? What do you think your most important characteristics are as a teacher? What are your key teaching goals? What actions do you take to support student learning?)
4. What instructional methods, materials, and techniques do you use to support your teaching approach? (Especially include any that are particularly innovative.) Write out examples.

Use these reflections to begin framing your approach to teaching. Next you will want to gather your evidence to analyze it into themes. The purpose of the following **organizational matrix** is to structure and organize your self-reflection as a teacher to create a teaching narrative statement that is unique to you and captures your essence as a teacher and a facilitator of student learning. Try initially to limit yourself to three. Fewer than three approaches should be extended; too many approaches should be consolidated.

EVIDENCE & EXAMPLES		REFLECTION (Philosophy)	APPROACH
Evidence of successful results of implementation for student learning (most cited in data aiming for triangulation)	Evidence of implementation for students learning (examples and illustrations)	Why this is important to you (link to your values about student learning and the rationale for your approach)	
1. Student evaluations speak highly of my use of iclickers. ("Professor's use of iclickers really helped me learn the concepts in the class and prepare for the types of questions on exams.") (see Appendix A for more student comments). 2. Through observing students, I see that they are highly engaged and motivated to learn due to the discussion taking place about the course material. 3. Peer formative observation noted how effective and engaged students were when they observed my class (see Appendix B for peer observation letter).	I use iclickers in the classroom to engage students. For example, in each lesson, I engage students with several questions throughout the class, often requiring them to work in pairs to answer a question.	I value student engagement, because research has shown that when students are highly engaged in class, their learning increases (see Ambrose et al., 2010). As well, research shows that students need to practice and receive feedback to support their learning.	Approach #1: I provide an engaging and interactive course experience as a mechanism to stimulate curiosity and provide opportunities for students to practice and receive feedback about the course material to enhance student learning.
			Approach # 2:
			Approach # 3:

Process: Arrive at the Approach from **blue** to **yellow** to **grey** (left to right).

Product: Write the Approach Paragraph from **grey** to **yellow** to **blue**.

Step 2: Prompts to help you write your teaching narrative statement or philosophy

As you prepare to write your teaching narrative statement or philosophy, remember the following:

- clearly define terms and concepts;
- remember that the focus is on student learning;
- be authentic and make sure the teaching statement reflects you and your experience;
- seek feedback from colleagues and others often on your teaching statement; and remember that the teaching statement is a living document and will change continuously.

Note that the **organizational matrix** itself is not the teaching narrative statement; rather it serves as the basis for preparing your teaching narrative statement or philosophy. The teaching narrative statement is typically a two- to three-page document that begins with an introductory paragraph containing some unique biographical and experiential features about you that naturally leads to your teaching approaches. The following paragraphs each refer to a particular teaching approach with specific examples that have manifested this approach, links to your particular philosophy about teaching, and references in the appendix to relevant supporting material (syllabi, student projects, course evaluations, etc.) The narrative statement ends with a summing-up paragraph or an extension of your introductory paragraph to bring the narrative full circle, including mention of the professional development activities you attend to improve your teaching.

A typical paragraph begins with a statement (usually in the present tense) about your teaching strength, which is followed by an elaboration or explanation of the approach. Next is a sentence or sentences describing (usually in the past tense) an example or examples of this approach as having been manifested in your teaching. Finally, there are references to pages in the appendix that demonstrate that the examples were successful, thus substantiating the approach. Note that if the provided examples are long and detailed, they might better be relegated to footnotes or referred to in the appendix so as not to disturb the flow of the narrative.

The following is an example of a paragraph describing an approach to teaching, based on the preceding organizational matrix entry (Note the use of references to Appendices for the presenting of details).

> *I provide an engaging and interactive course experience as a mechanism to stimulate curiosity and provide opportunities for students to practice and receive feedback about the course material to enhance student learning. I value student engagement, because research has shown that when students are highly engaged in class, learning increases (Ambrose et al., 2010). One method I employ to engage students in the classroom is the use of iclickers as a classroom response system. (See Appendix A for examples of my use of iclickers in the classroom.) Through my own observations of the students responding to iclicker activities in the classroom, I see them as highly engaged and motivated to learn through active discussions about the course material. Student evaluations speak highly of my use of iclickers and report that they value participating in the relevant activities and case-based small-group discussions (see Appendix B, page 17). See also the peer review from a colleague who observed one of my classes (Appendix C, page 10).*

A simple overall structure for the teaching narrative statement could be described as follows:

- An introductory paragraph
- "Approach" paragraph 2
- "Approach" paragraph 3
- A final summing-up paragraph

To strengthen your narrative, where appropriate, reference educational literature. The crucial questions are whether your teaching dossier makes the strongest case it can, and whether it reflects your distinctive attributes as a teacher. As is the case for teaching in general, the best dossiers are those that are constantly revised and updated. Written input from colleagues and friends included in the appendix can be invaluable in this process.

Step 3: Revisions, feedback, and edits

Once you have revised the statement to be no more than two to three pages, you are ready to garner feedback. You can do this in a series of steps or send it out to colleagues all at once. Consider sending it to colleagues, not only within your field, but from other fields as well to help get a broad range of feedback. Ask reviewers to consider clarity, strength of your approaches to teaching and supporting evidence, and tone. Remember that you do not have to act on every piece of feedback you receive, but do pay careful attention to repeated concerns or identified areas that need improvement.

You can also seek feedback from the faculty consultants at the Division of Learning and Teaching Support and Innovation.

Step 4: Organize your evidence into the dossier

The evidence is divided into source groupings: from you, from colleagues, and from students. Each grouping illustrated below (Figures 1, 2, and 3) gives ideas of the type of evidence you can gather from varied sources, with your aim being to gather evidence from all resources. This is not an exhaustive list; consider adding anything that you deem essential that represents you as a teacher.

Data from Oneself

Self-analysis and self-reflection are far too often overlooked in the assessment of teaching and learning; yet they are central not only to the processes of assessing teaching, but also to improving teaching. Thus, they are an essential part of your teaching dossier. Data from oneself might include:

- a list of courses or classes taught, with brief descriptions of course content, teaching responsibilities, and student information
- a statement of your philosophy of, or approach to, teaching and a description of factors that have influenced these
- examples of course material you have prepared and any subsequent modifications that were made as a result of your and your students' experience
- a sample syllabus or lesson plan
- a record of teaching discoveries and subsequent changes made to courses regularly taught
- a description of efforts to improve teaching (e.g., participating in seminars and workshops, reading journals on teaching, reviewing new teaching materials for possible application, using instructional development services, participating in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), and contributing to a professional journal of teaching in your discipline)
- evidence of your reputation as a skilled teacher, such as award nominations, awards achieved, invitations to speak, and interviews
- personal reflections on your growth and development as a teacher (indications of future teaching promise)
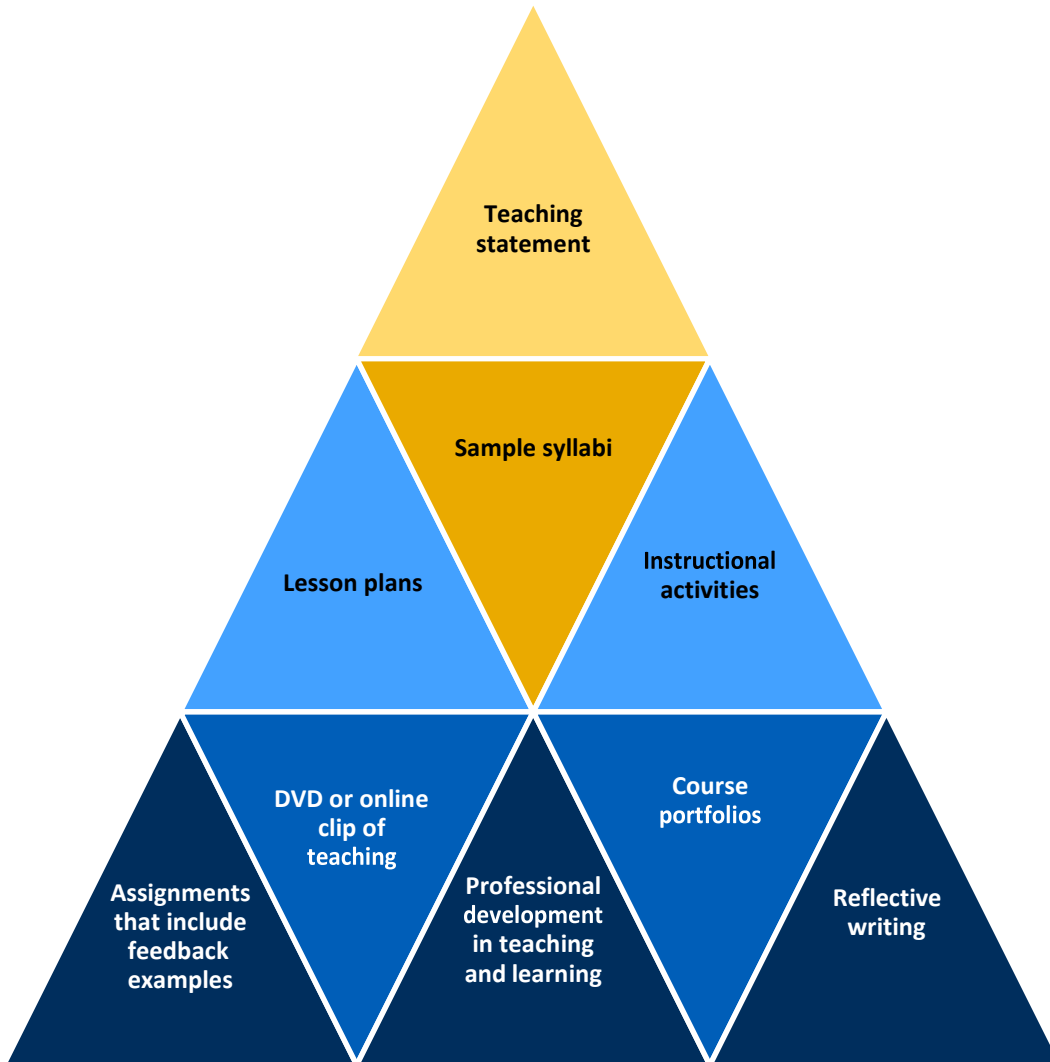
Figure 1: From you

Data from Others

Obviously, different people can provide different kinds of information about your teaching. While students may provide useful comments on whether, for example, you are prepared for class, arrive on time, are available for office hours, and facilitates learning, departmental colleagues are in a better position to comment on, for example, the breadth and completeness of your content knowledge. Clearly, getting the right kinds of input from each group of individuals is what will give your dossier its strength and depth. Accordingly, in the sections below, we summarize some of the data different sources can provide.
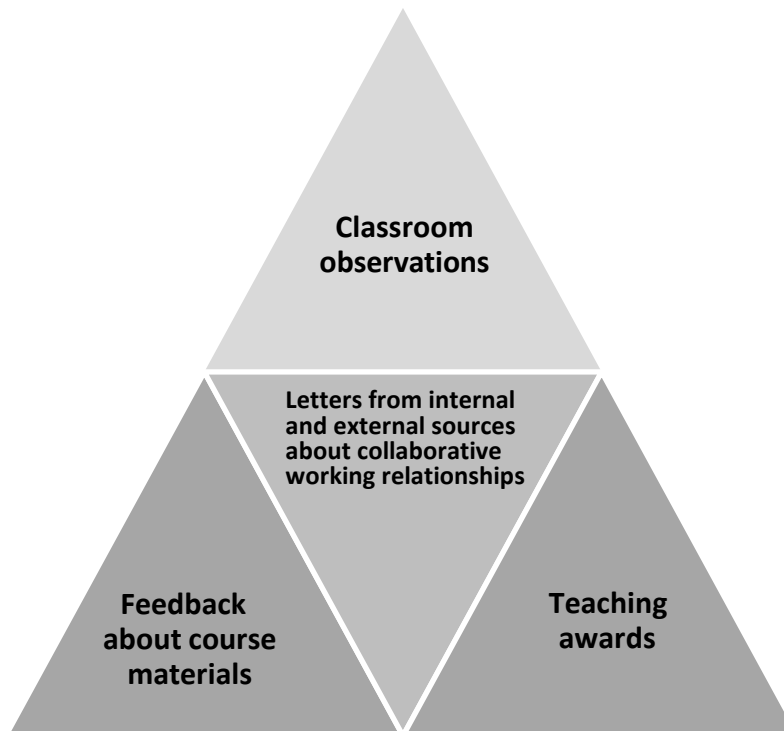
From colleagues

Colleagues within one's own department are best suited to make judgments about course content and objectives, your collegiality, and student preparedness for subsequent courses. Departmental colleagues can provide written evaluations and testimonials about you that reflect:

- mastery of course content
- ability to convey course content and achieve stated intended learning outcomes
- suitability of specific teaching methods and assessment procedures for achieving intended learning outcomes
- commitment to teaching as evidenced by expressed concern for student learning
- commitment to, and support of, departmental instructional efforts
- ability to work with others on instructional issues

Data from colleagues could include:

- reports from classroom observations by other faculty
- statements from those who teach other sections of the same course or courses for which your course is a prerequisite
- evidence of your contributions to course development, improvement, and innovation
- evidence of help or mentoring provided to other instructors on teaching, such as sharing course materials
- invitations to teach for others, including those outside the department


Figure 2: From Colleagues

From students

As the immediate beneficiaries of your teaching, students are in a good position to report and comment on a number of factors, such as what instructional strategies helped them learn the most and whether you came prepared to class, were available during office hours, or provided useful comments on papers. Other data that only students can report involve any changes in their level of interest as a result of taking the course, the degree to which the course intended learning outcomes were achieved, the extent to which the course challenged them, and whether they felt comfortable asking questions and consulting with you. Common ways of obtaining student feedback about these aspects of teaching include:

- interviews with students after they have completed the course
- informal (and perhaps unsolicited) feedback, such as letters or notes from students
- systematic summaries of student course evaluations—both open-ended and multiple-choice
- honours received from students, such as winning a teaching award

Other products of good teaching that involve receiving data from students are:

- examples of your own comments on student papers, tests, and assignments
- pre- and post-course examples of students' work, such as writing samples, laboratory workbook, creative work, and project or fieldwork reports
- testimonials from students of the effect of the course on their future studies, career choice, employment, or subsequent interest in the subject
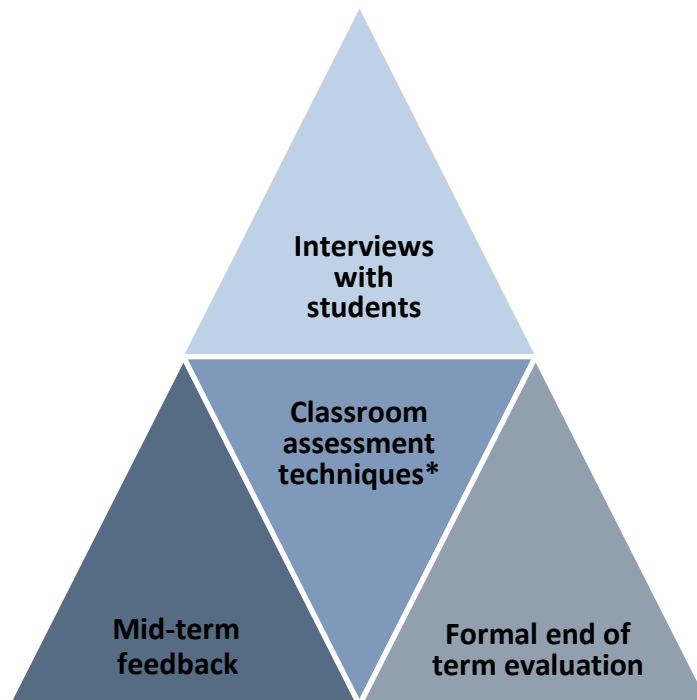
Figure 3: From students

*See, Angelo, T. A., & Cross, P.K. (1993). Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college teachers, 2nd Edition. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, for ideas on how to get feedback from students after any class session.

Selection of Materials

Clearly, it is not feasible to put all the data you have collected in a container or binder to send to an unsuspecting department chair, teaching committee, or awards committee. Before you engage in the necessary process of selecting what to include in your teaching dossier, consider the following questions:

1. Why are you creating a teaching dossier?
   - merit assessments
   - departmental teaching assignment decisions
   - job/grant application
   - teaching award nomination
   - self-analysis or reflection
2. Who is your audience?
3. What is the overall argument you wish to make?
4. What are the norms as to length and depth of a teaching dossier in your department or discipline?

Checking your dossier for balance

Once your **organizational matrix** is complete, and before you write your final draft, check your dossier for balance. In particular, make sure that the "data from others" come from multiple sources (students and well as colleagues).

Checklist

Use this checklist to ensure that you have completed the elements required for your teaching dossier.

Self-reflected on my values and beliefs about teaching and student learning ☐
Ongoing collection of data ☐
Developed organization matrix ☐
Wrote teaching statement or philosophy ☐
Received feedback from colleagues and LTSI ☐
Organized dossier and evidence ☐

Acknowledgement: Marty Wall, former LTSI Faculty Consultant for input in developing this guide.

Suggested Readings

The following is only a small sample of books that may help you frame your approach to teaching. These can be a beginning to explore different theories that appeal to you further.

- Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M. C., & Norman, M. K. (2010). How learning works: Seven research-based principles for smart teaching. Jossey-Bass.
- Illeris, K. (Ed.) (2009). Contemporary theories of learning: Learning theorists in their own words. New York, NY: Routledge
- Jarvis, P. (2006). The Theory and Practice of Teaching. New York, NY: Routledge.