Teaching Dossiers\(^1\): An Introductory Guide for Faculty

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At the University of Victoria, the processes of annual reviews, tenure and promotion are now requiring 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 faculty 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.

In order to begin developing your teaching dossier, consider 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 major claims would you make about your 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?) Try initially to limit yourself to three. Fewer than three claims should be extended; too many claims should be consolidated.

2. What instructional methods, materials, and techniques do you use to support your teaching goals? (Especially include any that are particularly innovative.)

A. Arrangement and Presentation of the Components of the Teaching Dossier

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 an appendix, which consists of supporting documentation.

1. *The teaching narrative statement* a reflective narrative, which is the key piece of your teaching dossier that makes a case for your teaching contributions based on the major claims you wish to state about your teaching, and it indicates how these claims support the case you are making. You will need to use specific examples that narrate your claims and reference to evidence that supports your claims.

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\(^1\) In this context “dossier” and “portfolio” can be used interchangeably. Generally, in the U.S. it is a portfolio; in Canada it is a dossier.
2. *Supporting Materials/data/documents* constitute the evidence that illustrates and supports the claims 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.

B. Preparing your teaching narrative statement using an organizational matrix

Starting a teaching narrative statement is very challenging and often leads to generic statements and educational jargon, rather than a personal statement of concrete claims that reflects your unique strengths. 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.

*The Teaching Narrative Statement Preparatory Organizational Matrix:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Teaching Strengths</th>
<th>Specific Narrative Examples</th>
<th>Supporting Data for Appendices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example 1: <em>I provide an engaging and interactive course experience as a catalyst for stimulating curiosity and interest in the course material.</em></td>
<td><em>In my course, I employed (a) games and activities, (b) clickers, and (c) case-based small group discussions.</em></td>
<td>See Appendix B on student reports on my teaching and use of clickers; see Appendix D on how students valued participating in relevant activities and case-based small-group discussions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Example 2: | etc. | |

| Example 3: | etc. | |
Note that the matrix itself is not your teaching narrative statement; rather it serves as the basis for preparing your teaching narrative statement. The teaching narrative statement is typically a two- to three-page narrative document. A typical teaching narrative statement might begin with an introductory paragraph containing some unique biographical and experiential features about you that naturally lead to your teaching claims. The following paragraphs might each refer to a particular claim about your teaching, perhaps supported by your particular approach or philosophy about teaching, specific examples of your teaching that have manifested this claim, and references in the appendix to relevant supporting material (syllabi, student projects, course evaluations, etc.) The narrative statement might end with a summing-up paragraph or an extension of your introductory paragraph to bring the narrative full circle.

A typical claim paragraph might begin with a statement of a claim (usually in the present tense) about your teaching strength, which might be followed by an elaboration or explanation of the claim. Next might be a sentence or sentences describing (usually in the past tense) an example or examples of this claim as having been manifested in your teaching. Finally, there would be references to pages in the appendix that demonstrate that the examples were successful, thus substantiating the claim. 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 “claim” paragraph, based on the preceding organizational matrix entry. (Note the use of footnotes for the presenting of details.)

I structure my classes to be engaging and interactive by using (a) games/activities (e.g. Jeopardy, Network Game, scavenger hunts) to support learning\(^2\) (See Appendix D), (b) audience response system (i.e., clickers)\(^3\), (c) case-based learning\(^4\) (See Appendix G), and small-group discussion. An engaging and interactive course structure successfully draws students into the course and stimulates curiosity and interest, which promote active and deep learning, problem-solving, communication, critical thinking, and analytical skills. The success of my strategies is reflected in the clicker-question student response rates, high homework completion rates, and the very positive student ratings (see Appendix H).

\(^2\) In course evaluations (Appendix F), students reported that the in-class activities “were really helpful to the understanding of the material” and that I was “interactive” and “very engaging” in my teaching.

\(^3\) Students have appreciated being engaged using the clickers in my larger courses, which typically range from 40 to 60 students (see student letter, Appendix C, page 4).

\(^4\) Students have highlighted the value in participating in the class games as a basis for case-based group discussions (see Appendix E)
A simple overall structure for the teaching narrative statement could be described as follows:

An introductory paragraph
“Claim” paragraph 1
“Claim” paragraph 2
“Claim” paragraph 3
A final summing-up paragraph

This is a useful formula for preparing one’s first teaching dossier. Over time, and with continuing updating, the teaching narrative could evolve into a less formulaic and more nuanced document. 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. Input from colleagues and friends added to the appendix can be invaluable in this process.

C. Compiling and Organizing Supporting Data in your Dossier’s Appendix

Supporting data in the appendix will come from oneself, from students, and from colleagues.

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 awards, invitations to speak, and interviews
personal reflections on your growth and change as a teacher (including awards won and indications of future teaching promise)

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.

1. 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 the instructor came prepared to class, was 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 learning outcomes were achieved, the extent to which the course challenged them, and whether they felt comfortable asking questions. 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
- honors received from students, such as winning a teaching award

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

- examples of the instructor’s own comments on student papers, tests, and assignments
- pre- and post-course examples of students’ work, such as writing samples, laboratory workbook or logs, creative work, and projects or fieldwork reports
- testimonials from students of the effect of the course on their future studies, career choice, employment, or subsequent enjoyment of the subject

2. 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 learning outcomes
- suitability of specific teaching methods and assessment procedures for achieving 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 given to other instructors on teaching, such as sharing course materials
- invitations to teach for others, including those outside the department

D. Selection of Materials

Clearly you cannot 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?

D. Checking your Dossier for Balance

Once your 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).