Guide to Preparing Your Teaching Dossier

FOR INSTRUCTORS AT UVIC

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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 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.

This guide begins with information, thought-provoking questions, and exercises to assist you in developing your teaching identity so that you can eventually 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 teaching goals, claims, and strategies.
- 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).

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

1. The teaching narrative statement or philosophy is 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. The teaching statement triangulates your claims with evidence from colleagues and students that support those claims. You will need to use specific examples that narrate your claims and reference to evidence that supports your claims.

¹ This document is sometimes referred to as a teaching statement or sometimes called a teaching philosophy. In this document, we primarily use the term ‘statement’.
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.

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. To facilitate an authentic teaching narrative, it is helpful to begin with some reflection.

**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 major claims can 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? What actions do you take to support student learning?)

4. What instructional methods, materials, and techniques do you use to support your teaching goals? (Especially include any that are particularly innovative.) Write out examples.
Use these reflections to begin framing your teaching claims. 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 claims should be extended; too many claims should be consolidated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVIDENCE</th>
<th>REFLECTION</th>
<th>CLAIM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evidence of implementation for student learning (Examples and illustrations)</td>
<td>Evidence of successful results of implementation for student learning</td>
<td>Why this is important to you (link to your values about student learning and the rationale for your claim)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I use clickers in the classroom to engage students. For examples of clicker use in the classroom, see Appendix A.</td>
<td>Student evaluations speak highly of my use of clickers. Through observation in the classroom, I see students highly engaged and motivated to learn through active discussion about the course material. Students report that they value participating in the relevant activities and case-based small-group discussions.</td>
<td>I value student engagement, because research has shown that when students are highly engaged in class, their learning increases.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**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 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 with specific examples that have manifested this claim, and links to your particular approach or philosophy about teaching, 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, including mention of the professional development activities you attend to improve your teaching.

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 references to Appendices for the presenting of details.)

I provide an engaging and interactive course experience as a catalyst for stimulating curiosity and interest in 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 clickers as a classroom response system. (See Appendix A for examples of my use of clickers in the classroom.) Through my own observations of the students responding to clicker 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 clickers 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

“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. 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 claims 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)
From You

Teaching statement
Sample syllabi
Lesson plans
Instructional activities
DVD or online clip of teaching
Course portfolios
Assignments that include feedback examples
Professional development in teaching and learning
Reflective writing

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

- Classroom observations

- Letters from internal and external sources about collaborative working relationships

- Feedback about course materials

- Teaching awards
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
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).

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.

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