Notes “Teaching Dossier” Workshop/Discussion Panel

Wednesday, February 16, 2011 12-2pm

The following notes were compiled by Michelle Schwartz during a workshop facilitated by Gosha Zywno. Ideas were brought forward during discussion by the panelists (as well as the audience). The panelists were all award-winning teachers in the Ryerson faculty. They were:

1. Gosha Zywno
2. Elaine Frankel
3. Tetyana Antimirova
4. Chris Evans
5. Rena Mendelson
6. Jacqui Gingras

Gosha Zywno opened the workshop with two definitions of “teaching dossier.”

A teaching portfolio is to teaching, what a "... list of publications, grants, and honours are to research and scholarship... [A portfolio] describes documents and materials which collectively suggest the scope and quality of a teacher's performance" –Peter Seldin

"A Teaching Dossier, or Teaching Portfolio, is a personal story that tells the reader about you and your teaching practice - unique to you, influenced by your beliefs, values, your discipline and your teaching culture." –Judy Britnell

Elaine Frankel then led the participants through a visualisation exercise:

Your dossier is your narrative or story of teaching. What were your influences that inspired you to be the teacher you are today? Get comfortable. Close your eyes and remember your very first experience with education. Think about that first experience in a classroom setting. Look around the environment, what do you see? Find your classmates, what are they doing? Find your teacher, what is he or she saying or doing? Find yourself – how do you feel? What emotions does that experience evoke for you?

Now, shift gears, fast forward to a day at Ryerson, you’re rushing off to class, who is stopping you in the hall? What kind of conversations are you having? As you enter your classroom, look at the environment. How is the room arranged? Find your students – what are they doing, what are they involved in, how are they communicating? Find yourself – what are you doing, saying, what emotions does that evoke for you? What are your goals for the students learning that day? How are you helping them reach those goals? How do you know if they have learned? How does it feel when the class is over? What will you be doing next?

Now take a deep breath and come back. Take a minute to jot down the answer to one question: What were the similarities or differences between that early childhood experience and your experience as a faculty member at Ryerson?

Responses from workshop participants:
• One similarity is the feeling of insecurity amongst students. In kindergarten children would be visibly crying. University students are also scared, though they express it differently—as learners, they are similar.
• Interactivity is good. In kindergarten, students are always doing different things, in university the instructor also has to maintain a level of interaction to get their attention.

ELAINE FRANKEL: I want to challenge the idea that teaching is intuitive. We may not have a formal pedagogy, but we are applying the things that have influenced us and made us the teacher we are today. Dossiers should be reflective of this passion—where did your influences come from and how did they impact you as a teacher? Find that passion. Brag about your successes and then add information from theoretical perspectives. My message is—don’t lose the passion and the fun in explaining who you are as a teacher and where your passion came from.

CHIRS EVANS: Article 4 of the collective agreement requires that a dossier be produced for tenure and promotion. The key points that need to be covered in the dossier evolved out of the ideas covered by Elaine—they allow you to show your passion for teaching. Important points to cover are your teaching philosophy, your currency in your field, any curriculum development you’ve done or special attributes you possess. It should be a combination of what teaching is for you and an account of what you’ve accomplished as a faculty member. Major teaching accomplishments should be included. Self-reflection is important for self-improvement. I agree that we are not born teachers, even those of us with innate talents, need to hone those skills. Self-reflection helps with this.

Working on a dossier will help you be a more organized teacher. Develop your dossier as you go—don’t wait until right before submitting your tenure package to build one. Taking time to create a dossier over the course of your career shows more development than a rush job. Also, if you think you might be nominated for a teaching award, you will have a large part of the requirements completed if you’ve already compiled your dossier.

TETYANA ANTIMIROVA: I prepared my dossier a year and a half ago when I applied for promotion and I already am unsatisfied with it and would do it differently today. It is a living document that will change with you and every new course you teach. Teaching philosophies should be personal narratives about what brought you into teaching and what keeps you in that profession—very personal and specific.

When I was preparing for tenure, I asked my DAC questions and then tried to adjust my dossier to what’s in the curriculum. It’s important to keep your philosophy from being too formal and generic.

If I could do it again, I wouldn’t wait until the last minute, I would do it gradually. It’s important to keep an inventory of what you’re doing, that will give you a chance to be selective of what you include.

Don’t overlook things that you do for other people that aren’t teaching—mention helping with curriculum review, developing courses, or performing service in teaching related areas. What do you do differently from others? What makes your teaching special? Document this and how effective it is—find out through evaluation if what you are doing works. Document your
evidence. When I did the UTDP, I had my dossier reviewed, and the question was always “Where’s your evidence? How does this help students? Why is it important?”

GOSHA ZYWNO: DACs matter most when applying for promotion

RENA MENDELSON: Creating a teaching philosophy is a good opportunity. I created mine after 34 years of teaching and it was a great moment for reflection.

You come to teaching because you have a passion for a subject matter and you want to share that with students. You are an expert and they are novices. The key to bridging that gap is to remember what it was like to be a student. I take courses and lessons in skill development and remember what it was like to be uncomfortable and uninformed. This has informed my philosophy and her approach to teaching.

I started in 1974. For the first five years, I was a part time student—going from class as a student to class as an instructor was a big transition and helped me keep thinking like a student. It’s really important to think about other subject areas and strive to master things that are new to you.

One thing that is a real challenge is inclusivity with respect to the capacity of students to develop passion for the topic, and to ensure that those who are struggling are just as engaged as those who sail through the subject. I use student feedback beyond course feedback evaluations. I give students tests using Blackboard during various points in the course and have Blackboard consolidate this into anonymous data. I use this data to improve in the next term, restructuring the course according to student advice. I also use this evidence in my dossier.

JACQUI GINGRAS: Have a theoretical framework for your teaching philosophy. The framework that I teach from is social constructivism—in the classroom I engage learners as co-learners. I see the classroom in which I teach as a place I will also learn. I imagine students bringing their experience and knowledge and see how they are positioned as both teachers and learners. In my dossier, I document how I am learning and teaching and how the students are learning and teaching.

On the first day of class, I ask my students what their expectation are for me as a teacher. I have them write it out on little cards which I look at throughout the term to see if I am meeting their expectations.

To get an idea of how engaged they are, I find a ways to assess in real time, rather than waiting for faculty course evaluations. At the end of a class I sometimes ask “What are the questions you are leaving with today that remain unanswered?”

To build my dossier from these mounds of paper, I do a bit of research using the evaluations as a starting point. I synthesize the information—what are the themes, what is the evidence, how has it been addressed in the next seminar or term or in the next assessment strategy?

As a way to personalize my teaching philosophy, I’ve included a photo, a quote I found inspiring, and references to influential literature. I’ve sought feedback from trusted colleagues who make it their immediate concern to be a place for people to go to ask questions. Anyone at the LTO will be supportive.
GOSHA ZYWNO: Be judicious about what you include. Your dossier can’t be a huge document that will drown the reader. It has to remain concise, which means approximately 15 pages plus appendices. The narrative should flow—avoid adding disjointed pieces.

QUESTIONS

QUESTION: I find it cynical that I’m doing things because it will look good in my teaching dossier. Where is the boundary between doing things because that’s what an instructor does and doing things to fit into the positive narrative of a dossier?

JACQUI GINGRAS: I was able to include something that wasn’t as glowing and positive because it demonstrated the very genuine aspect of things not always going perfectly. By framing it, it indicated that there was a continual iterative process of reflexivity, even if I wasn’t always a perfect teacher.

ELAINE FRANKEL: If you’re doing it and it’s working, that’s great, it doesn’t matter that it also looks good in your dossier. You’re doing it because it’s good for your students. Individuals often get upset with their feedback in the first or second assessment, thinking “How will I get tenure?” But teaching is a continual process. By being able to reflect and respond to criticism, you are showing how you have grown as a professor, teacher, and learner. It’s not a concern that you get twelve PERFECT letters, but that you can respond to all of them by showing growth.

GOSHA ZYWNO: We grow through adversity—when you are met with a challenge, fail, and try again. If you describe that in a coherent way, it makes a case for you being a reflective practitioner.

CHRIS EVANS: Your departments didn’t hire you to fail; they have a vested interest in your success. If you bomb on your first few evaluations, think of them as constructive criticisms with the goal of mentorship. The dossier is a counter balance; your chance to say what you think is going on by creating a narrative of adversity and improvement.

PAOLA BORIN: If doing things so they will look good that means you are going to branch out and try something new, that’s great. If it works out as a learning experience, or a success, it becomes evidence. No one is going to question your motives as long as you’re doing something good for your students.

TETYANA ANTIMIROVA: Often when you are trying something new, it won’t work the first time. Always try again because it will often improve and become very powerful. Bad feedback won’t ruin you.

QUESTION: Does a teaching dossier have to be a written document, given the new technology available?

CHRIS EVANS: At the moment, the answer is yes. That’s the policy right now.

GOSHA ZYWNO: I saw a multimedia dossier once and no one evaluating it looked at the multimedia materials. It’s a generational issue—older faculty are digital immigrants, not natives, and won’t look. Always have a hard copy backup.
QUESTION: You’ve mentioned evidence, there are many things I’ve done with no evidence. How do you include things that are significant without evidence or deal with situations in which evidence is lacking. Sometimes you don’t realize the significance of things when they occur and so they evidence doesn’t get kept.

GOSHA ZYWNO: Remember that if you didn’t have time to document it the first time around, it will happen again, but don’t make claims you can’t back up. Follow the theory of alignment for every claim—where is the theory beneath it, what do I do, how does it work for the student? This forces you to become creative with how you find evidence. Official instruments won’t do it. You have to find your own instruments. If you want to ask your students about the course for your own personal, formative feedback, you don’t need ethics approval (unless you plan to publish down the road). Ask your students, be creative.

ELAINE FRANKEL: You don’t need 500 emails showing you taught a good course as long as you show what you taught through the things they produced, the goals they met, and the learning that occurred.

GOSHA ZYWNO: For different portfolios and nominations you are asked to synthesize data yourself and put it in tables. Evidence doesn’t have to be something you touch; it can be an analysis showing you are a good teacher.

QUESTION: Teaching philosophy – if we are including student work or a thank you note, do you need permission to include it?

JACQUI GINGRAS: Evidence should be in appendices, not in the philosophy itself. Philosophies should only be three pages. The portfolio is the larger document. Don’t make a case for every little statement in your philosophy. Refer to other sections of the portfolio.

CHRIS EVANS: It is okay to include work that was submitted for a course because the portfolio is being distributed very narrowly. If it’s a production that the student may hold copyright over, consult the student, but otherwise, it’s okay, just remove names and identifying information.

QUESTION: When you say it should be 15 pages, what would the 15 pages consist of?

GOSHA ZYWNO: 15 pages is an estimate before the appendices, but don’t make it 35 pages. Allow 2-3 pages for the philosophy and a minimum of 12 pages before appendices.

QUESTION: Educational literature – how important is it to refer to techniques and strategies that have been studied, as evidence to support practice. Do you need to provide this support from literature?

RENA MENDELSON: Providing evidence from literatures is consistent with our work in academia. Learning more about learning shows your place in an academic continuum. It is important for your work to be grounded and not in your own head.

GOSHA ZYWNO: Finding where I stood in a sea of educational literature was a good exercise for me. It’s good research and good science, but it was also a good learning experience. It put names to things I was doing.

TETYANA ANTIMIROVA: Coming from sciences, this was important for me.
QUESTION: Should I provide comprehensive or anecdotal evidence?

CHRIS EVANS: Include all of your official evaluations and course evaluations if for tenure, with summary tables. Be more selective if you’re applying for jobs elsewhere. If there were extenuating circumstances for things that weren’t included, provide explanation for any gaps. If an evaluation was missed, the onus is on the department to explain why it didn’t happen.

GOSHA ZYWNO: If you were on sabbatical, make sure to mention that.

QUESTION: Should my dossier include just courses at Ryerson or courses from elsewhere?

CHRIS EVANS: You can provide context to your past, but focus on Ryerson.

QUESTION: What is an excellent descriptive term for a good dossier?

Clarity.

Narrative.

Comprehensive.

Reflects you.

Coherent.

Inclusive – Do think about various types of students in your class and the diverse student body. Are you serving different constituencies by experimenting with parallel ways of doing things?