


Reviewed by Pat Belanoff, State University of New York-Stony Brook

Composition (and Rhetoric) as a discipline has struggled throughout its history with the perception that it is somewhat lesser country—necessary at the college level solely because its clients (students) are defective in some way. And because these clients are at some lower level of development, the perception often is that their teachers are also—as though it takes less intelligence to teach kindergarten than
Shakespeare. Those within the field vary from one extreme that fights that image to another extreme that considers the issue irrelevant to its own work. It is at this end of the spectrum where most of the valuable work is being done—and none more valuable than that which makes connections between the practical and the theoretical/philosophical. Pedagogical approaches and research analyzing pedagogy have thus come to the forefront in recent years, but such work inevitably leads to considerations of how to represent itself. Drawing on the extensive scholarship on portfolio use, the contributors to Composition, Pedagogy & the Scholarship of Teaching, edited by Deborah Miner and Amy M. Goodburn, focus on the value of the teaching portfolio for documentation of both the practical and theoretical aspects of pedagogy. Although the topic might seem narrow, the editors and contributors to this volume demonstrate admirably the ways in which construction and evaluation of teaching portfolios can enrich programs, individual teachers, and current dialogues within the field.

The contributors to this book all approach their subject from different locations, but three major issues come to the fore: 1) how to integrate (or separate?) portfolio materials designed to indicate development and materials designed to promote the maker of the portfolio; 2) how to represent the “performative aspects” of teaching that “are, by nature, difficult to capture in the written texts we use to represent our teaching no matter how accurately we may believe we are doing so” (Anson and Dannels 95); and 3) how to negotiate the power relationships inherent in assessment and evaluation of teaching portfolios.

One aspect of constructing a teaching portfolio that those of us who use them may find enlightening is the discussion of the selection process (particularly in Newton, et al., “Reconsidering and Reassessing Teaching Portfolios: Reflective and Rhetorical Functions”). That made me reflect on—though the authors do not make this point—how similar such decisions must be to the decisions our students make as they construct a portfolio. We may tell them we want to see materials that demonstrate their development as writers, but they want to present to us only what they consider their best work. Newton, et al., advise young teachers to focus on the most effective way to present themselves to their audience. The conclusion of their article suggests that a teaching portfolio can demonstrate the teacher’s struggle to construct an identity within a particular environment, but I do not quite see how this struggle would meet the requirements stated elsewhere in this chapter about the need to present oneself positively.

The very next chapter, “Looping and Linking Heuristics for Teacher Portfolio Development” (Robinson, Cahill, and Blanchard), picks up this concern by struggling with how to construct a portfolio that presents one’s identity and yet serves other rhetorical situations. I find myself more sympathetic to this approach that suggests that teachers “return to their personal belief systems as a starting point” (16). In some ways, I wish this chapter had come first in the collection as it ties its dilemmas to those we actually face in our teaching: what is the balance between advising our students to begin by forgetting audience and to begin by
analyzing their audience? A genuine writing problem for all of us. The authors of this chapter are well aware that adherence to guidelines for constructing a portfolio may “promote an uncritical collection concept system rather than a critically self-aware portfolio system that emphasizes the conceptualized nature of teaching” (14-15). Again, I am reminded of my despair when I thumb through some student portfolios and realize that the student has merely followed a set of instructions and has not embodied in the portfolio, in any way, his/her writing self.

This tension between creating one’s identity in a portfolio and yet glossing over struggles in order to present oneself as having mastered all difficulties becomes more pronounced when one is preparing a teaching portfolio in a high stakes situation—tenure or promotion, a teaching award, or as part of a job-application packet. In “Constructed Confessions: Creating a Teaching Self in the Job Search Portfolio,” O’Neill confronts this issue directly, and while acknowledging the arguments of those who criticize the self-promotion aspect of portfolios, she asserts that the value of a portfolio to a teacher in a high-stakes situation comes during the construction of it and in the kinds of reflection it engenders, even though it may end up being mostly self-promotion. For her, satisfying an audience enabled her to discover new aspects of her own teaching. Again, such an awareness forces me to realize that some of my students do their best work by forgetting audience and others do their best work by analyzing it first. That’s a lesson for all of us.

Leverenz, in “The Ethics of Required Teaching Portfolios,” approaches this issue from a slightly different vantage point: the problem of requiring a teaching portfolio and ethical concerns about the valuing of diversity. To what degree will an individual teacher present a teaching philosophy and teaching practices that are at variance with the aims of the program in which she teaches? And if those who are evaluating teaching portfolios genuinely appreciate diversity, how does this play out as they assess portfolios? Leverenz concludes by praising the power of diversity and asserting her positive evaluation of portfolio assessment systems because they have the potential to manifest the tension between commonality and difference that is a productive force in any field of scholarship. While I am sympathetic to this approach, I’m skeptical about how well such deviation from a particular program’s goals might serve a teacher. For there to be no backlash, the program itself would need to create a high level of trust among all. Leverenz herself gives the example of her dialogue with a student who advocates approaches to which she and her program are not sympathetic. She quite respectfully asks him to give her views a genuine airing, but that request seems to me a one-way street as she does not commit herself to giving his views a genuine airing.

The second major concern I see in this collection is addressed at the outset by Ann Ruggles Gere in her Preface; scholarship directed at pedagogy must deal with attempts at direct representations of actual teaching. Such representation is not easy to come by in a text. I can read about how a particular teacher connects her/his teaching methods and her/his reflections on that teaching, but I cannot actually see it and hear it. I suppose that the ultimate artifact for overcoming this
dilemma someday will be a video accompanying a book such as this (or the teaching portfolio itself) that shows the actual classroom activity being analyzed by the prose. To give them extra credit, the editors of this book have made a move in that direction by providing a website (<http://www.heinemann.com/minter-goodburn>) that makes public materials relevant to the essays in the book itself. Thus, one can read a number of the chapters and access actual classroom materials that document what their authors say. Nonetheless, as Anson and Dannels cogently put it, there is “no adequate way to re-present that temporal event,” to re-present the “oral, embodied and performative aspects of teaching” (“The Medium and the Message: Developing Responsible Methods for Assessing Teaching Portfolios” 95). One further problem here is that the individual teacher “may be able to articulate” teaching approaches “more elegantly and convincingly than she is able to use them effectively in her teaching.” We have here someone who “talks a good game” but cannot produce points during actual play (Anson and Dannels 92).

In confronting this issue, LeCourt, in “Reading for Pedagogy: Negotiating the Complexities of Context from a Search Committee Chair’s Perspective,” moves away from any attempt to read a teaching portfolio as indicative of actual teaching practices. In debating with hiring committees at her own institution, she concluded that what is most important is the connections the job candidate forges between theory and practice and her ability to articulate that connection clearly. What she then looks for in a teaching portfolio is how a candidate “thinks about teaching” (108). LeCourt confesses that most teaching portfolios do not make these connections overt but that it is possible for careful and well-trained readers/evaluators of the portfolio to see those connections.

But the issue remains. How can a collection of texts present practice? How can we judge teaching without actually seeing it? Many hiring scenarios now include a segment in which the job candidate actually teaches a class. How representative is such a “performance”? The dilemma here is that faced by scholars and researchers, particularly ethnographers, in many fields: what is generalizable within the particular? And further: if I cannot generalize from particulars, if I cannot arrive at any theoretical or philosophical conclusions, is there any value in the particulars at all? For purposes of a review such as this, can I, as the reviewer, look at the texts and at the materials collected on the website and generalize about ways for making manifest the scholarship of pedagogy, or can I add to our conversations by scrutinizing the value of these contributions singly? I would argue that it is just this dilemma that leads many in academia to be uncomfortable about the “scholarship” of teaching. When I write a piece for publication, it appears after revision, suggestions from editors, careful proofreading, and so forth. I don’t include (as I often ask my students to do) earlier versions of the text. But if I present a visual reproduction of a particular class, I cannot go back and revise it; it’s there in all its glory (or lack thereof). How many such videos would I need to see of a particular teacher’s classroom before I could comfortably generalize?
This enigma is both fearful and productive. It forces me as an observer to recognize the teacher as an individual and to come to grips with the truth that every classroom situation is unique. It is just this truth that modern assessments want to hide. Advocates of such assessments want to find what is common to every classroom and—if it is judged successful by some process—how to transport that common element into every other classroom of the same subject, at the same level. In the process what is unique to a particular classroom is often overlooked, and teachers are forced to view themselves through the lens of assessors and remake themselves as carbon copies of some supposedly productive practitioners. Diversity is often given lip service but more often manipulated into standardized goals. It is in just such a climate that we must set forth the power of the individual classroom, the individual teacher, and the individual learner. Attempts, then, to render actual classrooms and put them on view for the public must be encouraged and financed in every way possible. This book and its website go in that direction.

Although I listed power issues as the third major concern of the contributors to this collection, many of the chapters do not make those connections directly. A portfolio compiled by one individual is turned over to another or to others for a reason: rehiring, tenure, a teaching or service award, promotion, a job search. Classroom observations, even by one’s peers, much more so by a hiring committee, can leave the observed teacher as a passive recipient of the judgment of others and can “set in motion a kind of master-apprentice model” (Minter, “Peer Observation as Collaborative Classroom Inquiry” 64). Power is inherent in evaluation, and yet not many of us understand how to evaluate teaching portfolios productively. I am not sure I would be as definitive as Anson and Dannels—“To review portfolios competently, evaluators first need to be excellent, reflective teachers themselves, familiar with the major literature on teaching in higher education” (98)—simply because I know that the faculty in my department are not going to spend their time reading such literature. And I’m sure my department is not unique. Yet they are going to continue to evaluate job applicants and vote on tenure and promotion. They have the power to do so; that power then virtually mandates that teachers constructing portfolios focus more on constructing an ideal teacher-self than on documenting a teacher-self. As Schendel and Newton, in “Building Community Through Reflection: Constructing and Reading Portfolios as a Method of Program Assessment,” note, making a “pretty” portfolio may actually take the place of efforts to improve. One presents herself as already formed rather than focusing on the forming process itself (123). Power here is detrimental.

Goodburn’s “The Course Portfolio: Individual and Collective Possibilities” comes at this issue by advocating a course portfolio which “represents a teacher’s experience with the significant moments, productive tensions, and assessment of student learning from the life of one course” (65). These portfolios can be shared with others teaching the same course or within the same department. In theory, such a portfolio aims to engender productive talk about a particular course and its role in the overall curriculum design. Goodburn skirts issues of power and
individual assessment here, but I suspect that individual teachers—particularly new and vulnerable ones—might not be motivated to present their problems with a class. The power of judgment remains.

Willard-Traub’s essay “Beyond Course Evaluations: Representing Student Voice and Experience,” raises a different kind of power issue and analyzes its ethics: how to use students’ voices in one’s own materials for job applications. She demonstrates clearly why her philosophical position demands that she do so and yet examines thoughtfully the ethics of using student voices in this way. She is not altogether successful in bringing these two issues together and offering a neat solution—but perhaps that’s as it should be. The whole arena of the use of student papers, comments, and evaluations in research is currently a much-conflicted arena.

Schendel and Newton confront power issues most directly. “Teaching portfolios are, in part, exercises of power” (121) is the very first sentence of their chapter. They quite clearly state that portfolios can be used both for development and for assessment. Development requires a safe environment; assessment militates against that. Regardless, however, of the purpose of a teaching portfolio, its construction also involves “negotiations of the many powerful discourses at work” in a teacher’s life. Thus a teaching portfolio is less about documenting “development” and more about “constructing” from intersecting influences an identity that can then be evaluated. Such being the case, these contributors advocate teaching portfolios more for program assessment than for assessment of individual teachers. Their ensuing discussion of standards and methods for program assessment is valuable in and of itself, apart from its inclusion of individual teaching portfolios. They value these chiefly because they present different lenses through which to view a particular program and, thus, can lead to a more diverse and realistic picture. Their main message is that if power is inherent in teaching portfolios, we need to harness that power to achieve institutional as well as personal goals.

A review such as mine cannot possibly capture all elements in this book. I am particularly appreciative of the obvious tolerance for difference of opinions on the subject of teacher portfolios. What I found most valuable in the book is simply straightforward discussion of issues with little strident advocacy of particular positions. Such an approach allows me to be a part of the discussion. I also value the timeliness of the issue itself. Increasingly, higher education is being called to task for its lukewarm interest in teaching. Composition and rhetoric may be, in the minds of some, a mere appendage on the maligned field of education, but that field itself is garnering ever more public attention. What I missed in the book was a contribution that simply presents the idea of a personal portfolio—one created just for oneself. What might I learn from creating such portfolio? Obviously materials from such a portfolio might be used in a more public way, but that would not be my reason for creating such a portfolio. I would see it mainly as a mirror, a place for my own reflections. Other than that omission, this collection will, I am confident,
be a valuable resource for many in the field: those constructing the portfolios and those struggling to evaluate them.

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In an aptly titled introduction, “Literacy in African American Churches: A Conversation Between the Academy and the Church Begins,” Beverly Moss explains how she came to the project of examining literacy within African American church communities. As a member of this community, she recalls listening to a sermon as both a church member and as a researcher. She was intrigued by what the minister said as well as how it was said. This moment, as the title reflects, speaks to the larger significance of her work: that is, Moss’s study dismantles the dichotomies between the academic and the spiritual. Often under the guise of the mantra “separation of church and state,” matters of the spirit are characterized as irrationality or at best, emotionality. As such, they are devalued and pitted against the rational, logical academy. Moss’s ethnographic study of four African American church communities merges both religious and academic concerns as she asks, “what constitutes a literate text in African American churches?” (139). Because she values these church communities and takes them seriously, she does not attempt to separate their belief systems from their literacy practices but instead recognizes them as interdependent. As such, Moss’s work disrupts dominant notions of literacy and literate texts as static, autonomous, written texts. Her study offers an alternative model of a literate text that holds profound implications for the composition classroom.

Moss situates her project within larger, on-going conversations about literacy acquisition and the literate practices of African Americans. Drawing upon the scholarly traditions of the New Literacy Studies as well as African American Literacy studies, Moss makes a case for the social nature of literacy. New Literacy theorists argue that literacy cannot be separated from its social context, which includes politics, culture, and power (see Heath, Gee, Street, Giroux, and others). These scholars use the term “literacies” rather than literacy to underscore opposition to monocultural, monolithic, and ideologically neutral conceptualizations of literacy. In addition to the political nature of literacy, African American literacy theorists emphasize that reading and writing are not the only components of literacy; cultural practices, identity, and language use influence the purposes and modes of oral, literate, and postliterate texts among African Americans (see Royster, Logan, Richardson, and others). Moss extends these discussions by broadening the domains