

## Reflection: Baring it on the Blog

*Ruth Rodgers*

### 1. Abstract:

*A teaching and learning specialist reflects on the challenges and rewards of undertaking to blog publicly as she develops a course portfolio for an Introductory Psychology course.*

### **Key Words:**

Course portfolio; blog; blogging; reflection; scholarly teaching

### 2. Heading

In my position as Teaching and Learning Specialist at Durham College/UOIT's Centre for Academic Excellence and Innovation, it's my job to model good teaching practices. As well, I've been encouraging my faculty colleagues to consider the development of course portfolios, repositories not only of the expected course documents, but also of reflective writings and the results of informal research. Putting these two facts together, when I agreed to teach a first year Psychology course this term, it was pretty obvious that I should practise what I preach and develop a course portfolio for this course.

My Director has been promoting the changeover of our centre website to a blog format in the interests of stimulating dialogue on teaching and learning. Accordingly, I took a deep breath and offered to bare my soul to my community of practice by blogging a portion of my course portfolio. I determined that the section that would be of most interest to our blog readers would be the reflective musings that would accompany the more objective evidence and data one usually collects in a course portfolio (course syllabi, teaching materials, sample evaluation tools, student feedback, etc.).

The resulting process has been both challenging and rewarding. Knowing that I was going to be telling "the world" what I was doing made me a bit hyperconscious of "doing everything right," and my first class was a slightly frantic mosaic of every good practice I could think of! I've subsequently settled down a bit, but the requirement to blog certainly keeps me on my toes in terms of designing effective learning activities, soliciting regular feedback from students, and being deliberate about reflecting regularly. It's also a struggle to maintain my integrity by revealing when things don't go as well as I'd hoped—along with my thoughts on improving it next time around, of course.

The rewards have been a side effect of the challenge—because I do feel the need to exemplify good practice, I've been trying out more activities, creating more review opportunities, designing more supplementary documents, integrating more multimedia, and researching more supplemental resources. Recently, for example, we were studying sensation and perception, and I brought in chunks of peeled apple, potato, and (Vidalia) onion for students to taste test while holding their noses and closing their eyes—it's surprisingly difficult to tell what you are tasting with smell and sight removed.

I am confident that this exercise will be vividly remembered by the students, and they won't forget that gustation and flavour are two different things!

I am also more critically aware of the effects of my teaching choices upon student learning. As a result, I am soliciting their feedback more frequently. Just before the first unit test, for example, I surveyed the students. I asked about their perceptions of my use of stable learning groups and active learning activities, and about their judgment of their readiness for their first unit test, which was coming up the following week. The results were quite encouraging. Except for one person who was apparently not enjoying the group process, most students seem to see the groups as a benefit, or at least not a hindrance to their learning. There seemed to be no question that they were appreciating the active learning, however.

Of the 29 students who completed the survey (these surveys, related to my own informal research, are not required for the students), the results were as follows:

1. The use of learning groups in this class is
  - a. Helping my learning (16, or 55%)
  - b. Getting in the way of my learning (1, or 7%)
  - c. Not affecting my learning (6, or 20%)
  - d. Not sure (5, or 17%)
2. The use of learning activities (as opposed to the teacher lecturing) is
  - a. Helping my learning (22, or 76%)
  - b. Getting in the way of my learning (0)
  - c. Not affecting my learning (5, or 17%)
  - d. Not sure (2, or 7%)
3. Going into the first unit test, I feel
  - a. Very confident about my learning (1, or 3%)
  - b. Somewhat confident about my learning (24, or 83%)
  - c. Not at all confident about my learning (2, or 7%)
  - d. Not sure (2, or 7%)

It's also true that such intensive attention to a course takes extra time, and I certainly wouldn't suggest that anyone try to develop course portfolios for all their courses at once. Perhaps one course per year could benefit from this intensive development—but then the results of that intensity would be there for use in subsequent years, until the course came up again in your cycle of renewal.

In a recent conversation about the possible integration of teaching portfolios into faculty evaluation processes, someone suggested that to make submission of a portfolio mandatory might be considered intimidating and might suppress honest reflection. I can see how that could happen, but based on my experience with this course, I would say that it is equally likely that such a requirement, in the context of an appropriate culture of continuous improvement, would stimulate **more** experimentation, reflection, and better scholarship, and reflect the actual complexity of a teacher's practice far better than a few classroom visits ever could. I can only hope that, by baring my teacher's soul in this online course reflection, I am helping to create such a culture at my institution.

My blog can be read at [http://x.dc-uoit.ca/course\\_portfolios/](http://x.dc-uoit.ca/course_portfolios/). Like all blogs, it should be read from the “bottom up” to get the chronological drift. It’s also important to remember that this reflective blog is only one portion of the complete course portfolio, which I am developing in print format. Enjoy, and let me know what you think!

***Author’s contact Information***

*Ruth Rodgers*

*Teaching & Learning Specialist*

*Durham College/VOIT, 2000 Simcoe St. N., SW101, Oshawa Ontario  
L1H 7K4*

*Tel: 905 721 2000 ext 2540, Email: [Ruth.Rodgers@dc-uoit.ca](mailto:Ruth.Rodgers@dc-uoit.ca)*