

## Ep. 004: Teaching Portfolios

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Teaching portfolios are about more than just promotion and awards. The process of creating a teaching portfolio can be a powerful form of professional development for faculty. But what should be in it? And how can we, as teachers, use it to better student learning?

In this special episode, CTLT Director Claire Lamonica dives deep into portfolio philosophy with Erika Kustra, director of teaching and learning development at the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of Windsor, Canada. Kustra was [a guest at CTLT](#) during the summer of 2016.

### Transcript

**JIM:** Hi there, Let's Talk Teaching. Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching a podcast from the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology here at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee. Today we have a special episode for you. This is a conversation between our director, Dr. Claire Lamonica and a very special guest, Dr. Erika Kustra is the Director of Teaching and Learning Development at the Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada. We were very pleased to have her be our guest for about two weeks here at CTLT. During that time, she facilitated workshops for faculty and staff. And she also sat down with Claire to talk about a very interesting topic, one that often comes up in professional development for faculty members, the idea of creating your own teaching portfolio. Here's what they had to say.

**CLAIRE:** Thanks for agreeing to talk with us this morning. Erica, this is really exciting for us. And I wondered because you've been doing some work with a group of educational developers in Canada, on developing a framework for portfolio for educational developers. And that sort of led me to wonder about teaching portfolios, which are much more common, I think, probably in both countries. And we have been sort of a subject of conversation. Here at Illinois State. We have a teaching portfolio requirement for our Outstanding University Teaching nominees. And most departments and colleges require teaching portfolios as part of a tenure packet. Although one of our larger colleges, perhaps our largest, has recently done away with the teaching portfolio requirement. Which leads to the question, why teaching portfolios? What do you see as the advantage of having a portfolio of your work?

**ERIKA:** Well, I think we're facing very similar issues and questions in Canada as in the United States, and occasionally, you may hear me refer to them as teaching dossiers, because I guess the French influence we use both teaching dossier and teaching philosophy. And I would say probably over the past, at least 20 years, the use of teaching portfolios has been growing, primarily to document and show the evidence and allow teachers to tell their own story, and provide the evidence that they need to show how they are as teachers. So we often think about multiple purposes for teaching portfolios. One is personal and developmental. Because the sitting down writing about your teaching, identifying the methods, the strengths, the weaknesses, your approach, or your philosophy of teaching, those are all incredibly useful and powerful in continuing to develop as a teacher seeing where you started, where you are now, and where you

want to go. That kind of teaching portfolio is probably the largest because you would include your own reflections and any kind of evidence in there that you might want to track. The next most common use and reason that practical reason that people want to use them is when they're applying for new positions. A lot of universities and colleges require a teaching portfolio when you apply or request portions of it, which are always easier to take out of an existing portfolio. Some don't require them. But we have heard back from applicants that when they submitted one, it gave them an advantage because it provided extra evidence to the committee that they were excellent in both their research and their teaching. So applications for new positions are definitely a strong for us tenure and promotion. When you're going up for your annual review. And also coming up for tenure. You are encouraged although not required to submit a portfolio but as are the people in our university committee say it is to your advantage to tell the whole story and because the committee's can only use the information you provide. And only you have access to the full extent of what you do to prepare for teaching and the impact that it has on your students. So it provides teachers the opportunity to provide the evidence that they need. And honestly it gives them a really strong position as they go forward. And then of course the final one is awards and then you're you're trying to show that you are not only good, you are excellent and you are excellent compared to other excellent teachers,

CLAIRE: I think that's the hardest thing about the university's Outstanding University Teaching Awards every year, as someone who chairs the committee that reviews those nominees and those portfolios, they're all excellent. And it's so distressing to have to identify the most excellent of the excellent, that's really, that's really difficult. What do you think is probably the most important thing to document in a teaching portfolio?

ERIKA: In some ways, it may seem the least obvious and the most difficult, I would say, your teaching philosophy or your approach to teaching, because without that, the rest of it is incoherent. So I when I'm reading, and I read a lot of them, when I'm reading a teaching portfolio, the philosophy is often the beginning. And sometimes I'm beginning to think of it almost like an abstract and an introduction to you as a teacher. And what that really identifies is what you think is most important, what you care the most about, and what drives you as a teacher, and what makes you different, a little bit different than any other teacher. And when I read those, they have to hang together as real and honest, and that's very difficult for people to do. The other thing is they set the context and almost the narrative string, that the rest of the dossier or portfolio hangs on. If if what you say in your philosophy, I believe in active learning, for example, is not borne out by the rest of your, your portfolio, the evidence in your portfolio, then the whole thing comes across as lacking in integrity. And so that is probably the most difficult thing to write. But the most important because it sets the tone in the context for the rest of the dossier. And it allows the reader to have a sense of you as an instructor that is then borne out by the other evidence that you include in the dossier. And the dossier or portfolio is a form of evidence, you would never write a research paper and say, here's the raw data, draw your own conclusions. Instead, what you're doing is you're pulling real evidence from multiple places that allow a reader to triangulate, and that you are in fact, a good teacher and you're continuing to develop as a teacher.

CLAIRE: I've been really interested lately in what you just referred to the, the the need to connect everything we do to our teaching philosophy. And I actually just recently at the teaching professor conference this spring, did a session which was frighteningly well attended about teaching metaphors and building your teaching philosophy around a metaphor, but then making sure that that metaphor also informs things like your attendance policy, or your late work policy. And so if, for example, you say that to that learning is a development process, and then you say, work that's not submitted on time will not be considered, then there might be some discrepancy there between your philosophy and your actions. So I'm interested to hear you say that the body of work is actually evidence for your philosophy. And I think that's how the university teaching committee looks at it. When we're reviewing portfolios.

ERIKA: The most common thing to include is the student evaluations of teaching that that is probably consistent across almost all of the universities and colleges I've ever seen. And they are variable in how well they're included. And that's I think one of the other things that we have been working with people to think about is how you include your student evaluations of teaching or student responses to instruction, whatever they're called at your institution, because they're numeric, which carry a lot of weight in a committee and people feel that they understand how to read them. But it can be really powerful to show a graphic, or chart, a figure of change across time. But most of us also need to annotate the information that's included. So you can't just include all the raw numbers, you can include something that shows the pattern, and then explains the pattern. And so for example, if your institution has a strike, hopefully not, but ours did. And consequently we had a large number of teachers that had some low student evaluations as a result immediately following and it became important for them to to include an explanation of what happened. Also, sometimes you're teaching a new and very difficult and well heated course. And and so having an explanation that would put it in context for people who are not in your discipline, because usually as you're going up for tenure and promotion, for example, or awards, you're you have an audience reading your dossier that is not from your discipline or your department. And so don't know the history that your teaching environment has faced. So that's your opportunity as an instructor to provide the context that the readers need to have. I had a director who I look up to greatly, and he told me there are two ways to lie in a portfolio. One is to say you are better than you are. And one is not to let them know how good you are. And in both ways, they need the proper and accurate information to make the best decisions they can for whatever purpose your your dossier or portfolio has been put forward for.

CLAIRE: So what would you suggest would be some great questions to think about as you're starting to pull your portfolio together?

ERIKA: Well, for people who are just beginning, it can be intimidating. So often, what I recommend is that they, for a while they carry around a pad of paper, or even an electronic note pad of some kind a device

CLAIRE: A device.

ERIKA: And every time they think of something about teaching, they jot it down. And if you are a newer teacher, or a graduate student, you're sitting in classes, sometimes that could be things that you dislike, I really hate it when, or I love it when, and you just sort of jot those things down for a while and you carry those things around with you. And you don't even, that, or analyze them for a while, because what you're doing is you're gathering information. The other thing I suggest is that anything about teaching that you think of you create either a physical folder for, or an electronic folder for, and throw it in. Because a lot of our teachers have been teaching for a number of years before they think about putting together their teaching portfolio. And then they realize that they

CLAIRE: Throughout haven't saved.

ERIKA: Yeah, so keep it if you if you choose not to use it, that's fine, but keep it for now. And that's things like emails from students. And I thought I kept mine by not deleting them from email, but it turns out, I can't find them. So just copying and pasting the content of that email into a Word document or printing it out and throwing it into a folder. So very practical things like just gather it and keep it and you can analyze it later. And then you can look back at what you've collected. And see, is there a theme? Is there a trend in the comments that you've written down the things that really bother you? So sometimes we ask people to think about, what do you hate most? When do you feel the best when you're teaching? What's your greatest success as a teacher? And then why? For each of those questions, why

CLAIRE: Always the why.

ERIKA: And then the other very common thing, I was very practical, I couldn't answer any of those questions as a graduate student when I was putting my dossier together at first. So instead, what I did was I had to ask just the really practical, what do what are the physical things I do? How do I set up my class? Do I meet with students outside of class? What do I do during office hours? What do I include in my lesson plan? The very practical and then why? And then the why I start to tease out Well, if that's why, what does that mean about what I believe about teaching? And what does that mean about what I need to start thinking about adding or changing in my teaching, so that allowed me to collect evidence I hadn't thought about. Plus, there are a lot of resources online, the University of Alberta had a really nice short document that had about a page to two pages of kinds of evidence you might think about including, and most of them fall into a category Stephen Brookfield calls the lenses of reflection. They're pieces of evidence from the perspective of yourself, because you have access to information no one else does. How you design your course why you design your course that way, the course lesson plans, things like that. So from self, then from your peers, this can be very difficult to collect, because not always do the peers know what's happening. Teaching can actually be a very private endeavor for a very public event.

CLAIRE: It's really not in our culture to invite our peers into our classrooms.

ERIKA: Peer observation is wonderful if you have a friendly environment where it's safe. Alternatively, a critical friend can review your syllabus. A colleague could talk about

their experience co-teaching with you if you've had that opportunity. So letters from peers or insight from peers is the other lens. The really useful lens to to is students, student voices, which might be involved in your student evaluations of teaching, but they might also be letters or emails that they send you after class. And wherever possible, what you're looking for is specific examples that show you're achieving at least for one student, what you're trying to achieve in your your work. And then the final one is the literature. Because the literature has all sorts of evidence about what works and what doesn't. It has theoretical underpinnings for why certain things might be effective approaches. And that's another a fourth lens that you can look at, as you are gathering evidence for your portfolio.

CLAIRE: I really like that one of the questions that we ask our award nominees to think about is a teaching challenge that they have faced. And I think that that's often one of the most difficult, but I also think that the responses are among the most revealing of what makes a good teacher. Have you seen any place else that asks that or? We had a good question? That's

ERIKA: A great question. Because what people see as a challenge, we'll give a good sense about both what they find difficult what they find important. One of the things we also ask is, how do you create conditions for students to learn? And how do you know when students are learning?

CLAIRE: A nice question.

ERIKA: That's actually a shocking question for all of us to answer?

CLAIRE: Well, because we get so focused on our teaching that sometimes we forget that teaching and learning aren't actually the same thing. Just because we're teaching doesn't mean that they're necessarily learning, although we always hope they are.

ERIKA: Another question that I found fascinating and difficult is the question about a teachable moment. What is a moment in time where you changed your understanding about teaching or learning?

CLAIRE: Oh, that's a nice question.

ERIKA: And and sometimes that's when you were a student. And sometimes that says it. Often, if you've been teaching for a while, that's when you're a teacher. And something usually in terms of your interaction with students has changed the way you understand teaching and learning.

CLAIRE: I think for me, that was that moment actually came from the literature, that I had this sort of epiphany that what I had been doing for a number of years was just not helpful in terms of student learning. And I had to really, my, my map of my teaching journey shows that as a paradigm shift, that there was just this chasm in my teaching that oh, my gosh, I have to totally change the way I've been doing things. So that's a great question, too.

ERIKA: And for me, that happened as a grad student, when I was required to teach as part of my graduate program in order for funding, I never wanted to be a teacher, I was terrified of being up in front of students. And yet, here you are. And it was the turning point, I discovered through workshop that there were practical techniques that you could learn where that you did not have to be a born teacher, you could be the most shy person in the world, there were very practical things you could do. That would make your teaching better. And you could adjust them and play with them and experiment them slowly. But surely. And this opened up a whole world for me that I didn't have to be born a good teacher, I could become better. And that actually changed my life point.

CLAIRE: Yeah. Teaching as art, or science rather than just innate ability. Yeah, yeah. Very nice. Are there other questions that you ask? Or did you do we touch on most of them?

ERIKA: One question that's a little revealing is what would you like your students to say about you when you're out of the room? Oh, which is an interesting one. And when you probably will never know.

CLAIRE: If to make up the answer to that one. Well, what you what you would like them to say, you can come up with that. Yeah,

ERIKA: an easy start for people is to describe a great teacher. Because for most of us, we can think back to a great teacher and why we thought that teacher was great. That doesn't mean that we necessarily will become that teacher. But it identify something important about what we think is a critical part of being a teacher or a student. And then also, perhaps less fun is think back about a time that causes you the greatest distress as a teacher. And that often tells you something about what you care about deeply. And it can reveal something that is maybe not something you immediately think of but really matters to you as a teacher because that's often what causes you the greatest distress.

CLAIRE: Thank you, Erika, for taking some time to talk to us today. This was very helpful and best wishes on your journey back to Windsor.

ERIKA: Thank you very much. It's been a real pleasure to be here at this is an amazing center and a really nice University to visit and incredibly friendly and welcoming people. So thank you very much.

JIM: And that was a conversation between Dr. Claire Lamonica, our director here at CTLT, and a guest from over the summer Dr. Erika Kustra, from the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada. That's all the time we have for this episode of Let's Talk Teaching. If you want to find out more about the podcast, or about the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology here at Illinois State, you can go to our website [CTLT.IllinoisState.edu](http://CTLT.IllinoisState.edu). Until next time, Happy Teaching.