

# Brainstorming Ideas for the Portfolio

## Exercise One: Reflecting on your Course (Syllabus)

Select a syllabus from one of your courses and treat it as a significant work of scholarship that you will respond to with a five page reflective memo. Spend twenty minutes brainstorming on each of the three categories listed below, choosing among the given questions.

*Give careful thought to the shape and content of your course, as if it were a scholarly argument*

How does the course begin? Why does it begin where it does? What do you and your students do as the course unfolds? What do you lecture about or lead discussions around? What are the key assignments/and or student evaluations? How does it end? Why does it end as it does? What do you want to persuade your students to believe or question? Do you want students to develop new appetites or dispositions? Do you focus on particular topics that your colleagues do not? Why?

*Relate your course to scholarship in your field*

What are the methods and values that shape how knowledge claims are made and adjudicated? How does your course teach students the logic of your discipline? How do scholars in your field reason from evidence, what concepts do they employ, what assumptions do they make, and what implications do their conclusions have? How does your course open doors to the critical dialogues and key arguments of scholars on the cutting edge of your field? What intellectual abilities (or qualities) will it help students develop? What reasoning abilities must students have or develop to answer these questions? How will you explicitly spell out the intellectual standards you will use to assess their work, and why do you use those standards? How will you help students learn to assess their own work using those standards?

*Connect your course to students*

What do you expect students to find particularly fascinating about your course? Where will they encounter their greatest difficulties with comprehension and motivation? What reasoning abilities will students need in order to do well? How does the content of your course connect to matters that students already understand or experience? Where will it seem most alien? How do you address these common student responses in your course? How has the course evolved over time in response to them?

## Reflecting on your Class (Teaching)

Identify a telling episode or incident of actual classroom practice that reveals something distinctive about your approach to teaching. You might select a particular assignment, a laboratory demonstration, an interactive group activity, or a lecture and follow-up discussion. Write a brief (1-5 pages) memo answering some of the following questions:

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- What made it work?
- What did you assume about how and why people learn?
- Where did it fail?
- How would you change the episode next time?
- Why did you choose to document this particular episode? Is it a particularly compelling, insightful, or artful rendition of a key concept? A new metaphor or demonstration students find difficult? A unique interpretation?
- What did you hope students would be able to do as a result?
- Did you hope to change any attitudes?
- Why did you decide to promote these learning objectives?
- Did the class session go as planned or deviate from your design? How so? Why?
- Did you change direction to take advantage of some new opportunity, get around an obstacle, or deal with a new circumstance?
- What context is needed to understand the event? What questions are you trying to help students learn to answer? What larger questions will these answers illuminate?
- What reasoning skills or other abilities are you trying to help students develop?
- What have you and your students been doing up to this point in the term? What topics have you considered? What will you do in the days and weeks to follow? What will you ask students to do?

### **Reflecting on Student Learning (An Assignment)**

Choose an assignment, such as instructions for a student project, paper, problem set, classroom assessment, computer simulation, etc., designed to promote and/or elicit an important aspect of learning. Attach several student responses to the assignment, including your feedback to them, to illustrate a range of reactions. Write a brief (2-3 pages) memo in which you comment on what the assignment/student work samples reveal about students' learning in your course. Think of the audience for your material as a committee that is conducting a departmental or program review. The committee wants to construct a map of what and how students learn about your discipline. Use the following prompts to develop your memo.

*Why did you choose this particular assignment (as opposed to others)?*

How is it important to your overall intentions, course design, conception of your field, and the way you want your students to understand it? Are there distinctly different formats or focuses you could have chosen that would have highlighted different dimensions of the subject matter?

*Why did you structure the assignment the way you did?*

How did the particular question, problem, or application reveal differences in student understanding or interpretation of a critical concept? What patterns emerge as you study your students' work?

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*What efforts, in particular, do you hope your students will demonstrate on this assignment?*

What kinds of questions will they learn to answer? What reasoning or other abilities will they develop? What was your hypothesis for what students might learn? What evidence does the assignment provide that would confirm or disprove this hypothesis?

*What do your assignment and student responses tell you about how they are constructing ideas central to the course and to your teaching goals?*

What misconceptions do they have about these ideas? How do you identify and address student misinterpretations?

*On what standards do you judge student work on this assignment?*

How do these standards compare with those you would use in a more introductory/advanced class? Finally, what thoughts do you have about improving your assignment, your course, and your teaching as a consequence of completing this reflective exercise?