

Teaching Portfolios: Insider Perspectives (collected by KS, Nov 2014)

Here are three responses I solicited from recent HAA PhDs who placed in tenure-track positions. They all gave me permission to share their observations. Each of them is in a combined studio/art history department, though as you will see there is variation. The smallest, most “boutique” college (Ripon) places great stress on the portfolios and examines job candidates very carefully both on their teaching methods and on their ability to think programmatically and proactively about the curriculum. Larger institutions sometimes have a more laissez-faire approach.

The questions I asked were:

a. When you were on the job market, did hiring committees show signs of having read your TP and if so what did they respond to? If you have been involved in hiring, what have you looked at in candidates’ TPs?

b. What do you think is most effective to include in a TP?

1. Travis Nygard, assistant prof (and now chair!) of art at Ripon College (a small, selective, highly regarded liberal-arts college in Wisconsin). He is the lone art historian in a small dept that combines studio art and art history. As you will see from his remarks below, he put his teaching portfolio online when he was on the market:

<http://travisnygard.com/Text/Teaching.html>

My teaching portfolio on the web was certainly looked at by the committee that hired me at Ripon, and in fact I referred them to specific things on it over the course of my interviews. I think that every portfolio should include a teaching philosophy, syllabi, sample assignments, and perhaps something more unique such as a discussion of an interdisciplinary approach.

At Ripon I suspect that in every tenure-track search all documents submitted by an applicant are read carefully by members of the search committee. If an applicant refers the committee to a website with a portfolio on it, perhaps by simply putting a URL for it on their CV, then that portfolio will also almost certainly be looked at with interest. This is because the people who are asked to serve on tenure track search committees at Ripon are invariably the most dedicated, meticulous, and curious members of the faculty.

In terms of my experience with hiring faculty at Ripon, I have been a voting member of one tenure-track search committee, which was for a French language and culture position. I am also regularly tapped by search committees from across the arts and humanities to help with on-campus interviewing. This usually takes the form of a meeting to explore possibilities for cross-listing courses in the art department or contributing to interdisciplinary programs that I am involved with. Our job talks are open to the campus at large, and so I am also regularly asked to attend those, or simply choose to do so. I estimate that 20% of our tenured or tenure-track faculty, from across the entire college, show up for any given job talk. The search committee then solicits feedback

from faculty present. I also frequently do searches for adjuncts to teach studio art courses.

My take is that a teaching portfolio is essential to being hired tenure-track at a place like Ripon, although I don't think we explicitly ask applicants to submit one formally to the committee. It is instead something that applicants have made for themselves, and they use it as a resource throughout the interview process to share what they have done in the past, as well as their ideas for the future.

It may be useful to your students to hear what a typical hiring process would be like at Ripon, as that would make it clear when applicants would likely use their portfolio. For a tenure-track job, we tend to first ask applicants to submit a cover letter, CV, teaching philosophy, and three letters of reference. At this stage applicants would thus take the teaching philosophy from their file and submit it to us. The strongest applicants also tend to use their cover letter to refer to specific courses they have taught in the past, as well as some ideas for future courses that dovetail with our college-wide programming. They might offer to send syllabi or assignments related to courses taught in the past.

We then prepare a list of 10-15 people who will be interviewed via videoconference call. Nearly everyone who gets put on this first list of people to interview has taught multiple courses as an instructor of record, presented some research at a conference, and published something.

In advance of the interview, we let applicants know what types of topics will be discussed. Questions generally refer to teaching, research, service, the specific parameters of the job, and institutional fit. Applicants are also given a chance to ask the committee questions, or to share additional information with us. The best candidates mention specific courses and assignments during these video interviews, and they offer to send syllabi and sample assignments from their teaching portfolio to us. They also tend to have looked at the college website in advance, and thus can offer to develop new courses that fit with our programs. They might offer to send to us a description for an untaught course. They might also volunteer to start a new interdisciplinary program and serve as its coordinator.

We then bring 2-5 candidates to campus for lengthy interviews that last 24+ hours, involving teaching a class, presenting research, meeting with the search committee, meeting with students, meeting with the dean, meeting with human resources, and having meals. The candidates who are ultimately hired tend to carry a physical portfolio of teaching materials with them to all of these meetings, including copies of their CV, syllabi and sample assignments from the past, and often newly-written materials tailored to our specific job. Such newly-written materials often include lists of specific courses that they can teach in the future, which might be cross-listed in departments or programs already existing on campus. Sometimes candidates offer to develop a new program, using some of the institutional resources already in place. They then pull out items at appropriate times when discussing the job.

Candidates on the job market for the first time tend to underappreciate how interested we are in a candidate who can think programmatically about the curriculum, and who has a working plan before being hired. The best candidates prepare a list of courses to put in their teaching portfolio that they could offer, linked to the specific majors or minors that

they could contribute to. Usually we are doing tenure-track job searches because a faculty member has retired or left the college. Our departments are small, so that means that the departmental curriculum is on the table for discussion broadly.

Candidates who can clearly describe a program of at least six courses to teach with little overlapping content, as well as who communicate that they are flexible and open to developing different types of courses, tend to advance in the process. They often have lists of such courses in their teaching portfolio. This is for a practical reason—by the time that a hire has been made the deadline for the fall course listings has almost certainly passed and course registration is about to begin. There is thus an urgent need to submit the fall course offerings to the registrar immediately upon hiring. In the case of candidates from Pitt, a smart applicant might have a list of 6-10 courses including a survey sequence, an art appreciation course, a seminar for freshmen or seniors, a course on art theory or aesthetics, a course related to their dissertation research, and a few mid-level courses related to their comps areas.

In terms of some specific advice, I would recommend that your students write their teaching philosophy in such a way that it underscores progressive pedagogy. Unfortunately, the default assumption is still that applicants have an inappropriate approach to teaching, which is old fashioned, boring, and tedious. We want to see applicants state that they would be providing multiple rounds of feedback, teaching using discussions, teaching with lectures, requiring papers and presentations, making interdisciplinary connections, requiring class participation, and instigating co-curricular programming. Assembling assignments and handouts in a portfolio that reflect such approaches to teaching, would thus be a good idea.

The teaching philosophy should also suggest that the candidate can teach robust scholarship, so as to prepare our best students for graduate programs, but also suggest that they can teach the majority of our students in a compelling manner, who are not graduate-school bound. The teaching philosophy submitted to us specifically should not make any reference to advising graduate students, as our college does not have graduate programs. It should also refer to teaching either at our “college” or generally at an “institution of higher education”—not a “university.” That is obviously because we are not a university.

Lastly, I would say that when applying to a small school, the more interdisciplinary the teaching portfolio is, the better. Because our departments are small, search committees invariably are assembled from across the departments of the college. The audience is thus a multidisciplinary one, interested in how art history can enhance thinking broadly within the academy. In the case of the committee that hired me, there was no art historian on it with voting rights, as she was retiring. I believe that she was, however, shown application materials at a late stage, so as to be able to provide discipline-specific feedback. This meant that I was hired by a committee consisting of a painter, the art department assistant, a sociologist, a music historian, and a military historian, each of whom had a general interest in visual art. Making all teaching materials broadly interesting is thus a good idea to appeal to such a multidisciplinary committee at a small school.

2. Cristina Albu, assistant prof of contemporary art at U of Missouri-Kansas City, again a combined studio and art history dept, but considerably larger than Ripon's.

a. I recall being asked only one specific question related to the teaching portfolio. In the philosophy of teaching statement, I mentioned that I am using cognitive scaffolding strategies. Hence, I was asked to explain what kind of activities I design in order to fulfill this pedagogical goal. In most cases, I believe the teaching portfolio was consulted carefully by the hiring committee when making decisions about the candidates.

The more general teaching-related questions I was asked pertained to the types of courses I was interested in teaching. This is also the kind of information that is included in the cover letter for a job application. Many of the hiring committees were interested in figuring out if I could teach classes that would be addressed both to studio art and art history majors. They also asked if I could teach classes addressed to students with different levels of preparation (at UMKC, upper-level seminars are open both to undergraduate and MA students in Art History and Studio Art). I believe many schools have joint art and art history programs; hence, it is really important to give the hiring committee a sense that you are able to teach the history of art techniques/processes. I was also asked about teaching strategies that are meant to engage students in class discussions. Another question that stood out is how I plan to integrate my research goals with my teaching goals.

I have been on a hiring committee at UMKC for a person in studio art. Hence, the selection process was a little bit different. However, artists are also asked to submit teaching portfolios, including samples of their students' work and examples of creative in-class assignments.

b. I believe the TP needs to include:

-a teaching of philosophy statement

-a list of the courses taught by the candidate, including lectures that the candidate has given as a guest speaker in other classes; a list of teaching awards/certificates (if any)

-sample syllabi (I included syllabi of the courses I have taught, as well as a syllabus for an upper level seminar I wanted to teach in the Fall semester. I actually got a chance to teach that seminar at UMKC afterwards.)

-sample guidelines for assignments/projects - I chose one for each of the courses for which I had included a syllabus

-sample projects/assignments completed by students and evaluated by the instructor (maybe it's worth including an individual assignment that stood out and a team project that received the highest grade)

-teaching evaluations (all the quantitative ones and a selection of the comments made by students) - I saw some interesting TPs that include charts, representing an overall graphic representation of the scores received by the candidate (especially if they provide evidence of sustained progress)

-notes/emails written by students to show their recognition for the class

An index/list of contents of the TP may also be helpful so that the hiring committee can easily find information in such a lengthy document. In pdf documents, you can create hyperlinks to TP section headings for this purpose.

3. Robert Bailey, assistant prof of art history in the School of Art and Art History at U of Oklahoma, which combines art history, studio, and visual communication/graphic design. His is the largest department and institution of the three.

a. Few signs if any that much attention was paid to my TP. Sometimes I would get asked a specific question about a specific syllabus I'd sent, usually nothing that could be prepared for in advance but also nothing terribly important. Something like, "Oh, and how did the students respond to reading that essay?" I never had any sense that anyone read my teaching philosophy statement, though of course the famous "How does your research inform your teaching?/How do you translate these ideas from your research into your teaching?" question was ubiquitous in interviews, so having written one wasn't a vain exercise.

b. Sometimes I was asked for a generic "teaching portfolio," other times very specific things (i.e. statement of teaching philosophy + 3 syllabi), and yet other times nothing at all. Sometimes committees did not ask for teaching materials until before the first round of interviews, and then I sent a mix of grad and undergrad syllabi. The general sense I get is that the best materials to send when asked for a "teaching portfolio" in a non-specific way are whatever demonstrate broad experience and a sense of different levels of courses (grad seminar, upper-level undergrad seminar, advanced lecture course, introductory lecture course). I also, having taught quite a number of different courses by now, keep a list of courses taught/approved, syllabi at the ready/in development, etc. of the sort that goes in a tenure/promotion portfolio. I would say that if a prospective applicant had a teaching philosophy statement, a list of courses taught/syllabi built, and two or three different completed syllabi (specifically, different kinds of syllabi and preferably for courses that had actually been taught before), that applicant would be ready for anything.