

**Describing excellence: Describing excellence: Learning to write a teaching portfolio**

Fredrik Olsson & Janna Meyer-Beining

Østfold University College, Norway & University of Gothenburg, Sweden

**Institutional Description:** This research project has grown out of our work within educational development at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. The University of Gothenburg is one of the largest universities in the country, with over 55.000 students enrolled in its eight faculties. The university employs just under 3000 teachers and researchers on a full-time basis, all of whom are required to obtain a number of certificates on learning and teaching in higher education via the university's Unit for Pedagogical Development (PIL unit). Reporting directly to the university Board of Education, the unit is tasked with supporting the development of pedagogical competence throughout the university. To that end, the unit offers both mandatory and elective courses on learning and teaching in higher education, provides support for educational technology use, and is involved in the Excellent Teacher Scheme that was put in place in 2014. Both authors have been employed as pedagogical developers at the PIL unit for three years or more.

In addition to supporting the development of pedagogical competence through the work of the PIL unit, the University of Gothenburg, as most Swedish universities, also requires evidence for pedagogical competence for appointments and career development. Applicants for lecturer positions or professorships, lecturers seeking promotion to "Docent" (roughly equivalent to assistant professor), or teachers seeking the title of "Excellent teacher" all need to account for their pedagogical competence in teaching portfolios supplied alongside their applications. At present, the PIL unit provides some support for candidates writing these portfolios via a general introduction to the concept of teaching portfolio via video and text on the internal staff website. In the future, these resources will be replaced by a self-study course on the university's LMS, Canvas, which will provide more in-depth support for writing a teaching portfolio as part of an application to the different positions/titles. The project discussed here has been conceived as an initial step in this development. Both authors have previously participated in a Swedish-wide course in assessing pedagogical competence based on teaching portfolios. This has clarified some of the criteria that are nationally (and locally) considered relevant for the assessment of pedagogical competence as it is expressed in teaching portfolios. The project we are presenting here explores another perspective, namely the way in which authors of successful portfolios interpret this particular academic genre.

At the point of writing this draft, the project has been running for about six months, but we are still at an early stage when it comes to understanding our data. The early part of the project has been mostly devoted to data collection, creation of an early structure for the intended resource on our LMS, and preparatory work mapping institutional expectations in relation to teaching portfolios. Since neither of us have previously worked with genre analysis, we are hoping that the workshop will be helpful for us in deciding how to angle the analysis. We also hope that despite the early stage of this draft, the text will provide enough information to make productive discussions possible.

**Key Theorists:** This project is predominantly conceived of as an in-depth study of the ways in which pedagogical competence takes form in a specific academic writing genre, the teaching portfolio. Since the study will ultimately lead to the development of pedagogical support for novice writers of the genre, we have chosen a theoretical approach to genre analysis that has, at least historically, a

genre pedagogical focus. The following theorists are currently considered important for the project work:

**John Swales:** John Swales' work on genre analysis is at the heart of this project (Swales, 1990). In this work, Swales establishes discourse community, genre, and language-learning task as the main pedagogical foci for a productive writing-pedagogy. Our participants are professional writers of academic prose in their field – but novice writers in relation to teaching portfolios. We hope that a Swalesian genre analysis of our data material provides us understand how our current faculty understands task and genre when it comes to teaching portfolios – hopefully helping us to better support future cohorts of teachers tasked with writing a teaching portfolio for assessment of pedagogical competence.

**Amy Devitt:** Devitt's (2015) discussion of genre analysis from the performance perspective is interesting in the context of his study, where the entire purpose of the writing task is to perform "pedagogical competence". It is, at this moment, still unclear in what way this perspective will be integrated in the study.

**Ken Hyland:** Hyland's (2015) discussion of the notion of identity in writing genres is related to Devitt's understanding of performance (published in the same journal). Since teaching portfolios are considered (from the external examiner perspective) a written representation of teachers' actual pedagogical competence, it is going to be important in this project to discuss how (and if) this aspect of teacher identity is performed/constructed/achieved in the teaching portfolios that form our data.

**Thomas Olsson, Katarina Mårtensson & Torgny Roxå:** The authors' (2010) conceptualization of pedagogical competence is influential for the assessment of pedagogical excellence in Sweden and is therefore an important element of this study.

#### **Glossary:**

**PIL unit:** The unit for pedagogical development at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden

**Pedagogical developer:** A position in place in most Swedish universities, providing education and support for teachers in matters relating to teaching and learning in higher education

**Teaching Portfolio:** A written document outlining the pedagogical competence of applicants to various positions/titles at Swedish universities ("pedagogisk portfölj" in Swedish)

**Canvas:** The learning management platform currently used at the University of Gothenburg

**Docent:** An academic title that is earned after a doctorate in Sweden. Roughly comparable to the title of assistant professor in the US.

**Excellent teacher:** A title that is awarded to higher education teachers that fulfil certain requirements with respect to their demonstrated pedagogical competence at Swedish universities. Each university determines its own application process, criteria, and rewards for successful applicants.

# Describing excellence: Learning to write a teaching portfolio

Fredrik Olsson & Janna Meyer-Beining  
University of Gothenburg, Sweden

## Introduction

Imagine you are a researcher hoping to secure a permanent lecturer position at a Swedish university. You gather your research credentials, you write a CV and a proposal for your potential contributions to your prospective faculty – and then you realize that you are also required to account for your pedagogical competence based on a teaching portfolio. If you are like most of the teachers we meet in our day-to-day teaching practice, you will be wondering about the work that might involve. What is pedagogical competence, how can it be described in writing, and what format would a teaching portfolio even have? These are the types of questions prospective applicants might ask of us, who work as pedagogical developers at a large Swedish university. Occasionally, we also receive similar questions from colleagues applying for promotion to Docent, the Swedish version of assistant professor, and from colleagues seeking to be appointed to the title of Excellent teacher in recognition of their exceptional pedagogical efforts. In our answers, we usually refer back to the single handbook on writing teaching portfolios in the Swedish context (Winka & Ryegård, 2013) and the specific evaluation criteria provided by the university, as well as the knowledge we have acquired as participants in the national course on the assessment of pedagogical competence that is arranged regularly to prepare prospective external examiners for the assessment of such teaching portfolios. There is, in other words, considerable information available on the *institutional* expectations connected to this professional academic writing genre in Sweden. However, there is – to our knowledge – very little research available that explores the characteristics of actual teaching portfolios that have been written and accepted as fulfilling the expectations of higher education institutions in Sweden. There is, in consequence, very little known about the ways in which teachers understand and approach the task of performing pedagogical competence in writing. Based in particular on Swales (1990) genre analysis, this study aims to explore how teachers interpret the university's request to document their pedagogical competence and how they translate available instructions into text – in other words, how teachers constitute the “teaching portfolio” genre one teaching portfolio at a time.

Internationally, teaching portfolios have been used since the 1970s, first in Canada and later in countries such as the United States and Australia (Trevitt & Stocks, 2012; Winka & Ryegård, 2013), with the overarching aim of providing an authentic window into a candidate's pedagogical activities and reasoning for those who cannot take part in the teaching on site in the classroom (Trevitt & Stocks, 2012). In Sweden, pedagogical portfolios were introduced in the 1990s when the Higher Education Ordinance stated that pedagogical competence should be assessed alongside the professional and scientific competence of candidates (HF, Ordinance 2010:1064). In their textbook on writing a teaching portfolio for the Swedish context, Winka and Ryegård present the following definition, which we use as our starting point in this project: "A pedagogical portfolio is a compilation of information about a teacher's pedagogical activity with an emphasis on what the teacher has done, how the activity has been carried out, and what results this has produced" (2013, p. 9).

Having become the established way of documenting pedagogical qualifications in Swedish higher education (Winka & Ryegård, 2013), teaching portfolios are often discussed as a metaphorical folder with different compartments. They usually contain both narrative texts and various types of documentation such as work samples, certificates and other evidence. Winka and Ryegård (2013) liken the teaching portfolio to a museum exhibition: the public or “exhibition” portfolio is curated to meet the needs of a specific situation, for instance an application to the title of docent. To do that, a teacher needs to draw on a separate, private portfolio that acts as a form of archive for storage of interesting or relevant materials that are collected along the way for future reference. Although different universities provide their teachers with different guidelines for creating these public portfolios, all portfolios are meant to provide teachers with a means to produce an authentic representation of their actual pedagogical competence.

## Pedagogical competence

Despite the fact that it is a requirement for all university teachers according to the Swedish Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100), universities in Sweden do not share a common understanding of what pedagogical competence actually means. In a first report on pedagogical competence in Swedish higher education, Ryegård, Olsson & Apelgren (2010) point out that most universities in Sweden operate based on local interpretations of pedagogical competence that find expression in the (many) different sets of criteria for pedagogical competence/excellence that are formulated to guide the assessment of teaching portfolios.

However, there are efforts to consolidate the interpretations of the concept nationally, and this report was one step into that direction. Another is the development of national courses for external examiners of teaching portfolios, which are based on an initial discussion of the concept and which highlight one model of pedagogical competence in particular. This model was developed at Lund University and is discussed in detail in the same report (Olsson, Mårtensson & Roxå, 2010, see figure below). According to this model, pedagogical competence comprises four key areas of expertise: pedagogical practice, the observation of teaching and learning, theoretical knowledge of teaching and learning, and the planning of teaching. These four areas interact and inform each other and need to be accounted for in the assessment of pedagogical competence.

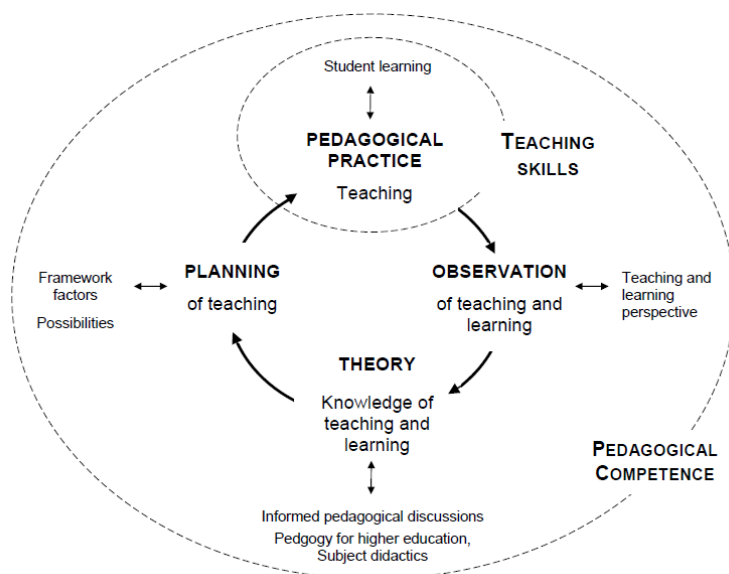


Figure 1: “Teaching skills and pedagogical competence” model (Olsson, Mårtensson & Roxå, 2010).

For teaching portfolios aiming at communicating (or representing) pedagogical competence, therefore, it is not sufficient to account for student satisfaction or to describe in detail the theoretical assumptions that a particular teacher might hold, without explaining in detail how those relate to observations about the teaching and learning setting in which a teachers is active, and without discussing how these observations and theoretical assumptions influence the planning of teaching on a day-to-day basis. As mentioned earlier, this model of pedagogical competence has relatively high currency in Swedish pedagogical development circles – it is not, however, the only understanding of pedagogical competence currently at work in Swedish higher education, where each university is responsible for formulating their own criteria for assessing pedagogical competence. In this study, we draw on Olsson, Mårtensson & Roxå's (2010) model of pedagogical competence for our overall view on pedagogical competence and use it as a sort of baseline interpretation of the concept. However, for the analysis of the 16 teaching portfolios in this study, we will also draw on the specific guidelines for teaching portfolios that the University of Gothenburg and each of its eight faculties have formulated.

## Pedagogical competence at the University of Gothenburg

Like all other universities in Sweden, the University of Gothenburg appoints teaching staff based on pedagogical and professional research competence. According to the internal university website, pedagogical competence is understood as

“a teacher’s ability to fulfil one of the university teacher's primary tasks: to support student learning and knowledge development, independently and together with colleagues. The concept comprises several important aspects, such as developing, evaluating, and conducting high-quality teaching, adapted to different student groups”<sup>1</sup>.

At the University of Gothenburg, pedagogical competence is assessed on three separate occasions: on application for a new academic teaching position, on application for Docent (assistant professor), and on application to the title of excellent teachers. For the latter, the university has established seven general assessment criteria. For job and docent applications, the university supplies general guidelines, while each faculty formulates their own instructions and criteria.

### Assessment criteria for Excellent Teacher

- Pedgogical experience
- Teaching skills
- Professional development
- Pedagogical leadership
- Cooperation
- Pedagogical reflection
- Development of knowledge about teaching and learning in higher education

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://medarbetarportalen.gu.se/lararhandboken/pedagogisk-skicklighet/?languageld=100001&skipSSOCheck=true&referer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>, accessed Dec 4, 2022

Basic Instructions for Teaching portfolios (general applications and docent applications), GU Guidelines, 2016-02-25<sup>2</sup>

The teaching portfolio should include the following sections:

- Background (present pedagogical practice)
- Higher education courses and study programs attended by applicant
- Experience of teaching and supervision within higher education
- Pedagogical activities: description, reflection, and development (a reflective section, describing pedagogical approach and pedagogical development based on theory and experience using selected examples of teaching practice)
- Development of teaching materials and other student learning resources
- Experience of learning, administering and developing courses and study programmes
- Development, depth of study, research and dissemination of knowledge including specialisation in teaching and learning in higher education
- Pedagogic activities outside the university
- Other pedagogical qualifications
- Appendix

Each of these sections is briefly described in the guidelines, and while these descriptions do not constitute assessment criteria, they are formulated in a way that suggests specific expectations both in terms of format as well as content of this text.

*Depending on the portfolios selected for closer analysis later on, we will also include a concrete description of the criteria for assessment of teaching portfolios in the respective faculties, which we have not had time to include at this stage.*

## Theoretical framework

The study we describe here is part of a larger project aimed at ultimately designing an online resource for teaching staff seeking support for writing their teaching portfolios at the University of Gothenburg. During the course of this larger project, we have worked in parallel in several different areas to support the development of that resource. Literature studies, an overview of available guides at the University of Gothenburg and a benchmarking survey of similar guides across Swedish higher education institutions helped to create a general sense of the different practices and expectations surrounding the use of teaching portfolios in Sweden. In this study, these findings are relegated to the background as we focus on another part of our project and explore actual characteristics of teaching portfolios written at our university.

As previously argued, the main aim for this study is to explore how teachers constitute the “teaching portfolio” genre one teaching portfolio at a time. The understanding of genre that we bring to this study is influenced by John Swales (1990), who describes genre in the following way:

---

<sup>2</sup> [https://pil.gu.se/digitalAssets/1577/1577602\\_teaching-portfolio-guidelines-160225b.pdf](https://pil.gu.se/digitalAssets/1577/1577602_teaching-portfolio-guidelines-160225b.pdf), accessed Dec 4, 2022

“A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style. Communicative purpose is both a privileged criterion and one that operates to keep the scope of a genre as here conceived narrowly focused on comparable rhetorical action. In addition to purpose, exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience. If all high probability expectations are realized, the exemplar will be viewed as prototypical by the parent discourse community. The genre names inherited and produced by discourse communities and imported by others constitute valuable ethnographic communication, but typically need further validation” (Swales, 1990, p. 58).

In this conceptualization, genres are not simply a collection of textual features that commonly co-occur and allow for categorization into particular text types. More importantly, genre is understood predominantly as a communicative means of fulfilling a particular purpose in a particular social context. In the case of the teaching portfolio, the purpose of the genre can be described as providing the documentation necessary to advance to docent/excellent teacher or to be eligible as candidate for a permanent teaching position. In addition (or at the same time), we also assume that the overarching purpose is to communicate pedagogical competence, which, after all, is ultimately what is being assessed through these teaching portfolios.

Our analysis of the empirical data in this study will focus on two separate research objectives. First, we aim to explore how prototypical the successful teaching portfolios at our university can be described with respect to the rhetorical and textual features of each available teaching portfolio. The overarching aim here is to gain information on the prototypical features of successful teaching portfolios for the purpose of better supporting our teachers in understanding the task at hand. This leads us to our first research questions:

*RQ1: What are the characteristic features of the teaching portfolio as professional genre at the University of Gothenburg?*

In addition to describing the common characteristics of the genre, however, we also want to explore the unique ways in which each teacher decides to perform pedagogical competence in these teaching portfolios. Drawing on Hyland (2015) and Devitt (2015), we believe that each instance of genre performance is unique and the result of both general knowledge and individual communicative goals, abilities, experiences, etc. Our teacher cohort at the university is characterized by great variation of educational background and experience, a multitude of pedagogical practices and various ideas about what might, in fact, constitute pedagogical competence in particular fields. From a pedagogical perspective, it seems imperative to understand better the various ways in which the genre can successfully be performed by individual writers/teachers. Devitt (2015) argues that while we will always need to teach general genre competence, “what is still required, though, is instruction in genre performances, the ways that abstracted genre competence plays out in actual texts, including ones the students will write.” (2015, p.48). Our second research question reads as follows:

*RQ2: What are the different ways in which pedagogical competence is performed in individual teaching portfolios at the University of Gothenburg?*

# Data material

This study is based on a corpus of teaching portfolios that were collected in the spring of 2022 at the University of Gothenburg. We discussed a number of methodological questions in the context of data collection. As previously described, the university asks for teaching portfolios on three separate occasions: for application to an academic position, for advancement to docent, and for appointment to Excellent Teacher. Since we are interested in describing the common features of the genre and we suspect that different purposes of portfolio writing will likely correspond with (more or less subtly) different types of portfolios, we have decided to focus on just one type of portfolio at this stage and have only invited teaching portfolios created by teachers who applied for a docent position at our university in the last two years.

A related problem is that instructions for writing a teaching portfolio for advancement to docent are faculty-specific. While there are general, university-wide guidelines for creating a teaching portfolio (see above), a number of faculties have developed additional specifications for their teaching staff. These are not common to the entire university. However, as a preliminary review of the faculties' guidance documents has shown, these instructions are rather sparse and offer very limited support for the candidate. It can be assumed that the general guidelines are the most substantial task-description available to the teachers in our sample.

Finally, we have variation in the languages chosen for these portfolios. Since the university accepts teaching portfolios in English and Swedish, we invited examples written in both languages and will make every effort to do both languages justice in our analysis. It will remain to be seen how and if the language issue will have implications for the analysis that is possible with respect to the larger corpus of teaching portfolios.

Data collection proceeded as follows: In the spring of 2022, we asked each faculty to supply us with a list of teachers who have been promoted to Docent over the last two years. We then contacted every person on these lists and received teaching portfolios from 16 of them. These 16 portfolios were sent to us as Pdf files, usually containing two or more separate files and included a signed consent form. This is a slightly smaller number than we had hoped for, but we believe that for the purposes of this qualitative exploration of the genre of teaching portfolio, this number is going to be sufficient. We consider this study as something of a pilot, and hope to be able to point out interesting aspects of the genre that might warrant further research.

## Analysis and results

*At this point in our project, we have not had the opportunity to dive into the data. We had hoped to be able to have conducted at least a preliminary screening of the data material prior to sending this draft, but were unfortunately unable to set aside much time for research over the last term. What we can say at the moment is that teaching portfolios appear to vary widely in terms of the overall structure of the text/s they contain. In addition, they are very different in terms of their length and the number of documents added as evidence for the competence established in the text. Our rather preliminary guess is that the formal characteristics of the genre (in terms of structure and intertextuality) are difficult to pinpoint – or that, indeed, the genre is characterized by great formal variation. At the same time, given the small number of portfolios in our corpus and the fact that they come from many different faculties, it could also be true that the variation is a reflection of the various expectations communicated in each faculty. A closer analysis of each text in relation to the faculty guidelines might help us understand that better.*



# References

Devitt, A. J. (2015). Genre performances: John Swales' Genre Analysis and rhetorical-linguistic genre studies. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 19, 44–51.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2015.05.008>

Hyland, K. (2015). Genre, discipline and identity. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 19, 32–

43. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2015.02.005>

Olsson, T., Mårtensson, K., & Roxå, T. (2010). Pedagogical Competence—A Development Perspective from Lund University. In Å. Ryegård, T. Olsson, & K. Apelgren (Eds.), *A Swedish perspective on Pedagogical Competence*. Uppsala University, Division for Development of Teaching and Learning.

Ryegård, Å., Olsson, T., & Apelgren, K. (Eds.). (2010). *A Swedish perspective on Pedagogical Competence*. Uppsala University, Division for Development of Teaching and Learning.

Swales, J. M., & Swales, J. (1990). *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*. Cambridge University Press.

Trevitt, C., & Stocks, C. (2012). Signifying authenticity in academic practice: A framework for better understanding and harnessing portfolio assessment. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 37(2), 245–257. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2010.527916>

Winka, K., & Ryegård, Å. (2021). Pedagogiska meriteringsmodeller vid Sveriges universitet och högskolor 2021. *Universitetspedagogik och lärandestöd*, UPL, Umeå universitet. <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-189071>