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THINKING PIECE

AI as a constructive partner in academic career development or a shortcut to promotion?

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Abstract

In this essay, we reflect on our experiences exploring the use of generative AI (GenAI) to develop teaching portfolios. Our motivation for this project stemmed from curiosity about how well GenAI could meet the formal criteria for teaching competence in promotion applications. Generative language models are reshaping how we work, learn, and think, with numerous measures related to teaching and assessment are already introduced at both institutional and national levels. While public debates have highlighted concerns from students and teachers about how GenAI challenges teaching in academia, particularly in the assessment of student learning, there has been little attention to how GenAI may influence staff careers and the assessment of competencies in applications for positions and promotions. In this thinking piece, we explore whether a GenAI assistant could generate a teaching portfolio for merited teacher status, based on the digital footprint of a teacher and the assessment criteria for promotion at UiT The Arctic University of Norway. Our experiment showed that GenAI tools can produce sections of a teaching portfolio that convincingly weave together educational theory, critical reflection, and practical examples to document teaching competence. The GenAI assistant also suggested innovative, ambitious, and visionary directions for future development. The result created unease and sparked a lively debate about whether teaching portfolios remain a suitable format for documenting and assessing teaching competence.

Keywords: *Assessment of teaching competence, Academic development, Generative AI, Authenticity*

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Introduction

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is reshaping how most actors in higher education work, learn, and think. In Norway, guidelines and measures addressing the use of GenAI in assessment practices have been introduced at both institutional and national levels. Students and teachers are currently debating how student learning should be assessed considering these developments (Francis et al. 2025). However, limited attention has been given to the use of GenAI in writing pedagogical portfolios for applications for academic positions and promotions. As academic developers working with teachers as our primary target group, we became curious about how GenAI might affect teachers' careers, particularly in relation to promotion processes. This curiosity led us to explore a question that has received less attention: What happens when GenAI becomes a "co-author" in teachers' career documentation? Increasingly, those of us involved in assessing teaching portfolios discuss the possible use of GenAI in the portfolios. Examples include portfolio texts that are dense and almost opaque, or generic phrasings across portfolios. Such a shift in the expression of portfolios raises an important concern: is the teaching portfolio still a suitable format for documenting and assessing teaching competence?

In this essay, we present and discuss experiences of a small experiment in which we used GenAI to create teaching portfolios. Our aim was to explore how well such portfolios could document the requirements for achieving the status of a merited teacher at UiT The Arctic University of Norway, the highest formal career level for teaching at the university. Before describing the experiment and what we learned from it, we first consider the purpose of teaching portfolios and what counts as evidence of teaching competence.

The role of teaching portfolios in documenting teaching competence

Teaching portfolios have a dual role: they are intended both to support teachers' professional development and to document teaching competence for hiring, promotion, and merit processes (Winka & Ryegård, 2024; Pelger & Larsson, 2018; Trevitt & Stocks, 2012). The pedagogical work described in portfolios often includes a teacher's teaching philosophy and their approach to teaching and student learning. Portfolios may also describe how teachers have systematically developed their teaching, courses, and programmes over time, through collaboration with colleagues, teaching development projects, or significant turning points in their careers.

Across institutions, competence requirements are largely similar and are built on principles from the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and aligned with the values of teaching and learning excellence (Gansemer-Topf et al. 2022). To achieve the status of a merited teacher, applicants must demonstrate a strong focus on student learning, show a scholarly approach to teaching, contribute collegially to educational development, and disseminate insights from their teaching practice. Additionally, applicants must demonstrate development over time through critical reflection on and evaluation of their teaching and supervision practices. Teaching portfolios typically include a range of documentation that captures aspects of a teacher's practice. These artefacts are often text-based, such as teaching plans, evaluations, letters of recommendation, course descriptions, research and development work, and may also include videos, screenshots, images, and podcasts.

It is the written or multimodal, presentation and documentation that we assess when evaluating teaching competence. A well-known challenge is distinguishing between writing well about teaching and documenting teaching competence. Furthermore, it can be demanding to assess whether reflections are grounded in actual, systematic work, or remain rather theoretical. Language, structure, and coherence in the main text can also shape the overall impression and guide further reading of criteria and documentation

(Larsson Lindbäck, Wedman, & Gedda 2025). The assessors' tacit knowledge might influence assessment processes (Nygren & Sjöberg 2025). Uncertainty related to the use of AI adds an additional layer to these challenges.

Making an AI-generated Teaching Portfolio

Our exploration of generating a teaching portfolio with generative AI (GenAI) was driven by curiosity. How easy is it for a GenAI tool to document teaching competence at the level required for merited teacher status? In practice, it turned out to be remarkably easy. Today, it is possible to create AI assistants for many tasks, including a "teaching portfolio assistant" capable of providing feedback, guiding reflective writing, challenging arguments, and describing teaching practices. Our experiment showed that GenAI tools can produce passages in a teaching portfolio that convincingly integrate pedagogical theory, critical reflection, and practical examples to document teaching competence. To explore this further, we tasked the GPT-5 model (Pro license), hereafter referred to as our AI assistant, with writing a teaching portfolio for Iris. Iris is an associate professor, a merited teacher, and the head of HelPed, the Centre for Faculty Development at UiT The Arctic University of Norway. She has a background in physiotherapy and previously worked in a bachelor's programme in physiotherapy before becoming an academic developer.

Let us return to June 2025, in a small meeting room on the UiT campus. Four academics gathered to test our portfolio assistant. To support the process, we gave the AI access to the criteria for promotion to merited teacher at UiT and to an article about writing teaching portfolios (Sandvoll et al., 2024). We did not upload Iris's CV, publications, or other documentation. Instead, the AI assistant was allowed to use Iris's digital footprint from publicly available online sources. To test the AI assistant's ability to fill in gaps and generate reflective narratives, we also allowed it to "hallucinate" that is, to predict Iris's teaching experiences and practices based on the available information. Initially, we asked the AI assistant to produce an outline for a portfolio. Next, we instructed it to generate the sections according to this outline. The result was striking: the text was written in a distinct, self-reflective voice and appeared highly coherent. In the following sections, we examine some parts of the generated portfolio that illustrate different qualities. First, we discuss questions of authenticity in relation to writing a teaching philosophy. Second, we examine GenAI's ability to portray a self-reflective merited teacher. Third, we reflect on the portfolio assistant's creativity in proposing ideas for future development.

Below is an example of the AI assistant's description of how Iris's background in physiotherapy has shaped her teaching practice:

> I entered academia by way of physiotherapy, a profession that taught me to see each human body as an ever-adapting system whose recovery depends on purposeful feedback, contextual understanding, and collaborative goal setting. That same clinical ethic now underpins my approach to teaching and educational development. I view learning as a co-constructed, inquiry-driven process situated in authentic contexts; my role is to design environments in which students can iteratively test ideas, interrogate evidence and contribute to communities of practice that extend beyond the classroom. (…) I bring the same relational logic into education: learning happens when students and teachers construct meaning together in authentic, practice-based situations.

Our AI assistant highlighted a dimension of Iris's teaching philosophy that she had not previously articulated herself, yet one that she nonetheless recognised as authentic. The text presented an identity that felt genuine, even though Iris had not formulated it on her own. The AI assistant identified connections between clinical physiotherapy and teaching

that had not been explicitly articulated in any publicly available document. This discovery became a kind of eureka moment for us. We were surprised that the AI assistant was able to identify such connections. If this reflects how Iris thinks and works, might it be legitimate to include such reflections in a teaching portfolio? In a guide to scholarly writing, Nygård (2008, p. 30) states:

> Putting words on paper helps us think things through. Suddenly gaps in logic become visible. Things we thought we knew, thwart our every attempt to describe them (...) ideas float around in our heads without explicit connection between them. We might sense a connection, but until we try to describe it on paper it remains ephemeral.

Our experiment has shown that GenAI could help us see connections as illustrated above, and expand our perspectives on our own teaching practice. Such texts may be regarded as instruments that help us develop new understandings of a phenomenon. Drawing on Cave's (2016, p. 54) work on affordances: «you need eureka moments, or more modestly, an instrument that can make a difference, wheels that can take you further». When Iris read the AI-generated portfolio, such a eureka moment occurred.

Instead of writing the text oneself, one might select and curate elements from AI-generated suggestions, choosing sentences or passages that resonate as accurate or authentic. In this scenario, the process becomes less about writing text and more about selecting, refining, and curating. We challenged ourselves with this thought and would like to challenge the readers of this essay in the same way. What would be wrong with selecting, refining and curating a text rather than writing it yourself? The answer might be, "it depends". We will come back to this question in the closing reflection of this essay.

The AI assistant continued by generating a teaching philosophy grounded in several theoretical perspectives: Donald Schön's concept of reflection-in-action, John Biggs' constructive alignment, and Etienne Wenger's theory of situated learning and communities of practice. These perspectives were further supported by Roxå and Mårtensson's concept of microcultures. Using Stephen Brookfield's four lenses: teachers' own experiences, student perspectives, colleagues' feedback, and relevant literature, the AI connected the different parts of the portfolio. Many of these scholars and perspectives have appeared in Iris's academic publications and her actual teaching portfolio. For Iris, this felt quite uncanny, particularly because her portfolio was not publicly available at the time. The generated text described how these theoretical frameworks shaped her practice, how her teaching had developed over time, and how it was embedded within a collective academic context. From the perspective of experienced assessors of teaching portfolios, such theoretical grounding would typically be considered a strength in an application for merited teacher status.

Our AI assistant also invented several teaching practices, some of them quite interesting and innovative. It even generated fictional student evaluations as documentation. One of the criteria for merited teacher status is a clear focus on student learning and the active use of student feedback to improve teaching. The AI assistant appears to have detected that student evaluation of teaching is one of Iris's research topics. As a result, perhaps not coincidentally, it generated a reflection on student feedback using a new metaphor: student evaluations of teaching as "pedagogical cardiography", a "living ECG." We found this metaphor both creative and compelling. The AI assistant then described an evaluation practice integrated into the ongoing learning process rather than into the end-of-semester evaluations. In this narrative, the AI assistant portrayed a shift from an intuitive and partly unreflective teaching practice toward a more analytical and data-informed approach, where both student voices and collegial observations inform continuous development:

> The feedback has stopped being mirrors we look into once per semester. It has become a kind of pedagogical cardiography: a living ECG that shows the rhythm of the learning environment and reminds me to respond while the heartbeat is still happening, not only when the semester is over. This pulse-based- practice — grounded in student voices and colleague perspectives — drives both my own development and HelPed's ambition for continuous improvement.

The example above uses technical metaphors drawn from medicine. Initially, we doubted whether our AI assistant could also produce more human and emotionally credible narratives. Once again, we were surprised. When teachers develop a portfolio, they draw on years of work in teaching and educational development. This is often an emotional process in which hope, motivation, the desire to improve, moments of joy or flow, and experiences of success or failure are all part of it. At other times, teaching feels almost beyond repair (Cohan, 2009). Many teachers recognise emotions such as doubt, sleepless nights, renewed hope, persistence, and a deep commitment to both the subject and the students. Teaching is closely tied to identity, and this often becomes visible in portfolios. The AI-generated portfolio included many recognisable emotional elements and described reactions to feedback in ways that felt human:

> While the students help me see the teaching from the inside, my colleagues have worked as a critical mirror from the outside. In the beginning, three of us met in a small office and discussed our teaching using Brookfield's four lenses. As the courses grew, the same reflection model moved into a weekly forum where a larger teaching team — now also including student representatives — shares fresh observation notes. It was in one of these meetings that I was confronted with how much I dominated the plenary discussions. I had believed I was facilitating dialogue, but my colleagues' descriptions of the distribution of talk challenged my self-image. The criticism was painful, but it also gave me a concrete path forward. (…) In short: the students' words have taught me to listen, my colleagues' perspectives have taught me to see, and the connection between the two has given me a humbler — but also more action oriented — pedagogical voice.

It is easy to imagine the teacher sitting in her office, reflecting on this uncomfortable realisation. The narrative conveys both tension and growth. Through Brookfield's four lenses, the teacher's understanding of her own role is challenged and reshaped. The text portrays a teacher who genuinely seeks to improve the quality of her teaching. From the perspective of a committee member, the link between the reflection and the examples in a teaching portfolio would likely appear convincing.

At most institutions, applicants for merited teacher status are expected to include a plan outlining how they intend to improve their teaching and contribute to future educational quality. Our AI-generated portfolio was certainly visionary. Drawing on the teacher's published research on student evaluation of teaching, the AI assistant proposed multiple educational innovations. One example was an "EvalLab" designed to strengthen the use of student evaluation data and, according to the AI assistant, one that would "impress NOKUT". Another example was the creation of "teaching analytics huddles", small collegial meetings where teachers would discuss educational innovation and analyse teaching data together. According to the AI-assistant, these initiatives would help ensure that successful innovations do not remain isolated, one-off projects but instead become part of ongoing development work, potentially extending beyond the institution and into the Arctic Six university network, of which UiT is a member.

With some human editing in the final stage, the AI-generated portfolio might well have met the standards expected of a merited teacher. For us, the question is therefore no longer whether GenAI can generate portfolios. The more pressing question is what we should do about it, as this development challenges existing merit systems, documentation

practices, institutional procedures, collegial trust, and the assumptions underlying current assessment practices.

Closing reflections

Our experiment demonstrates that generative AI (GenAI) can produce a convincing teaching portfolio, one that could potentially be used in promotion processes and even lead committee members to believe it was written by an experienced teacher. Using GenAI to generate teaching portfolios may remove the portfolio's value as a process document, creating a risk that teaching competence is assessed on the wrong basis. It may also reduce the value of the portfolio for the person who produces it, as well as for those who read and assess it. In the long term, it could even weaken the value of having one's competence formally recognised. It may also undermine the collegial communities that often arise around portfolio work, turning what is typically a collaborative and reflective process into a more private and individual matter.

Reflection on one's own teaching is crucial for the quality and continuous development of teaching practices (Sandvoll et al., 2017). Learning processes tend to be unfocused and messy, characterised by moments of struggle and uncertainty. As Dall'Alba and Bengtsen (2019, p. 1486) argue, beneath what seems to "hold everything together" lie disconnected thoughts, broken arguments, and doubt. Such experiences should be articulated in a teaching portfolio, as they are essential to the process of learning. A potential risk of using GenAI to finalise texts too early may transform teaching portfolios into products rather than a process that values reflection. At the same time, the use of GenAI could potentially strengthen portfolio work. Such tools may help teachers articulate and identify patterns in their teaching experiences and, as we have demonstrated, make implicit pedagogical choices more explicit. GenAI can also act as a brainstorming partner, challenging assumptions, offering alternative framing, and expanding opportunities for reflection. If the purpose of developing a portfolio is to support critical reflection on teaching, the key question may not be whether GenAI was involved but whether its use deepens or replaces reflection. GenAI might contribute to improving teaching portfolios and teaching practices by potentially inspiring teachers to develop new ideas and teaching approaches. Teaching competence, however, is ultimately more about practice than words. Above all, a teaching portfolio should reflect one's teaching practice, motivations, disciplinary context, students, and collegial environment. Perhaps our experiment points to something that is already a challenge in documenting teaching competence through portfolios. Strong writing skills have likely supported teachers' promotion long before the emergence of GenAI.

In the introduction to this text, we stated: "limited attention has been given to the use of GenAI in writing pedagogical portfolios" (p. 2). However, perhaps this is a narrow view defining what a portfolio might be. A possible way forward is to place greater emphasis on the pedagogical portfolio as something you do, rather than something you write. A portfolio could also be more embodied and livelier, a multimodal assemblage that invites a whole universe of teaching practices, including artefacts such as audio, film, co-teaching, reflections, and recorded conversations with students or colleagues. Teaching portfolios must actively value and invite documentation of thinking-in-progress. In doing so, portfolios can be spaces where learning remains part of a process that teachers invite others into. Emphasising joy and curiosity can turn portfolios into more lively and playful representations of teaching practice. As noted, teaching is inherently unpredictable, characterized by emotions, uncertainty, revised judgements, and ongoing collegial conversations. This presents an opportunity to think creatively about how to capture a rich, "thick" description of the "cardiography" of teaching practice.

For us, as academic developers, this is a moment of uncertainty, but also a reason to place these questions more firmly on the agenda (Iversen et al., 2026). The emergence of GenAI challenges not only how teaching portfolios are written, but also the assumptions that underpin how teaching competence is recognised and assessed across academic careers. Perhaps this moment invites us to rethink the portfolio itself, not primarily as a polished text produced for assessment but as an ongoing, collective, and practice-based exploration of teaching. If teaching is inherently relational, emotional and unfinished, perhaps our ways of documenting teaching should also leave room for uncertainty, experimentation and thinking in progress. The challenge may therefore not simply be that AI can produce convincing teaching portfolios. The deeper challenge may be that strong portfolios have never necessarily been the same thing as strong teaching. Through this thinking piece, we invite colleagues to engage in a broader discussion about how teaching competence might be documented and assessed in the future. While the future remains uncertain, this moment may also open possibilities for rethinking what teaching portfolios are for, and what kinds of teaching practices they should make visible. If an AI-generated portfolio can still feel authentic, perhaps authenticity in academic development was never located in the text alone, but in practices, relationships and conversations surrounding it.

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