

Writing a Statement of Teaching Philosophy

Fashioning a Framework for Your Classroom

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Writing a statement of teaching philosophy is a cornerstone of reflective and scholarly practice in teaching and learning. A strategic set of practical and philosophical guidelines, including a definition, elements, and structure of a statement of teaching philosophy, is presented for experienced and novice educators to craft such a statement.

All those who enter a classroom or other teaching situation have a philosophical framework (a teaching philosophy) that guides their practice, so it is ironic that writing down a statement of teaching philosophy outside of a job search is a relatively new practice in higher education. Significant publications on this topic did not appear until the 1990s (Goodyear and Allchin 1998; Chism 1997–98).

As with other scholarly practices, committing your ideas to writing requires an added degree of reflection on your purposes and intents. By writing a statement of teaching philosophy, you also make your thinking public, open to discussion or comment. This is a good thing. Whether you are an experienced faculty member or a graduate student who is preparing materials to apply for your first faculty position, writing your statement of teaching philosophy codifies your thinking at a particular time.

The teaching statement gives you a starting point for examining your teaching practices, allows you to share your ideas with others, and allows you to monitor the progress of your own development as a teacher. Additionally,

a teaching statement is a great organizer for a course, curriculum, or teaching portfolio, where you explain details about your teaching practices and your students' learning (Seldin 1997; Cerbin 1996; Hutchings 1996; Eichinger and Krockover 1998).

Along with a curriculum vitae, a research statement, and a cover letter, a statement of teaching philosophy is becoming an increasingly important piece in the materials that represent you as a faculty member (or a future faculty member). While this article is meant to assist experienced, inexperienced, and future faculty with writing their teaching statements, there are a couple of important caveats to consider. This guide is neither comprehensive, prescriptive, nor the last word. Indeed, a statement of teaching philosophy is an extremely personal text, and it should reflect and represent its author as an individual. I hope that these guidelines and suggestions will help authors of teaching statements organize their thinking in useful and strategic ways (see "Web Resources," page 451).

What Is a Teaching Philosophy?

Just because you have never written a statement of your teaching philosophy

does not mean that you do not have a teaching philosophy. If you engage a group of learners who are your responsibility, then your behavior in designing their learning environment must follow from your philosophical orientation. A written teaching philosophy answers a direct question that has multiple facets, namely, what is teaching and learning to you? This complex question can be broken down into the following categories, accompanied by a set of appropriate questions to help direct your thinking.

Theoretical Framework

How does learning take place? This question should feel like a challenge because it is. Most faculty members do not have any background in educational theory. Indeed, faculty can be disdainful and suspicious of discussions about educational theory because it is so out-





side of their experience. Fortunately, you can still write your teaching statement if you are in that group.

First, think deeply about more and less productive episodes of learning (not teaching) that you have been a part of, and then try to capture the essence of those experiences to guide your thinking about designing instruction. Many people find it useful to think of a metaphor that can capture the spirit of a successful learning experience. Are students empty vessels into which instructors pour well-organized information? Are students members of the learning team in which instructors are the coaches? In any case, be prepared to add a sentence or two of explanation about your metaphor so that readers get the sense of what you mean.

A theoretical framework can have multiple targets. For instance, one statement might assume an individual learner is its focus, while another might proceed from the idea that groups of learners are key. Alternatively, an institution's

mission and how it allocates its resources might be the framework selected by someone else.

Goals

Instructional goals are an important starting point in your instructional design. Goals are often construed naively as a syllabus of topics ("Students will learn the Crossed Cannizzaro reaction during lecture number 24," for instance). In your statement of teaching

philosophy, you should not only consider examples of what subject matter items you think students should learn, but also some of the broader issues that add value to the education students can be expected to obtain by working with you. You might also consider the question of why these goals are important. It is useful to think in terms of three levels of educational goals represented by these three questions.

- ♦ What goals do you have for students as learners in the specific subject matter?
- ♦ What goals do you have for students as learners in chemistry, as a science, and as science learners in general?
- ♦ What goals do you have for students as learners in general, within the liberal arts educational framework where chemistry sits?

Design and Implementation

Design and implementation are different. You can have a good plan (the skill) but still not be able to enact it (the will) (Paris and Cross 1983; Paris et al. 1983; McKeachie 1994). This is because teaching is a complex social activity that requires physical and emotional behaviors in addition to just a good idea. A smoker who decides to quit for lots of good reasons demonstrates the skill, or understanding, of what to do, but this alone does not constitute the behavioral will to enact the plan.

Once you have constructed your instructional goals, you need to address how you think you can help students ac-

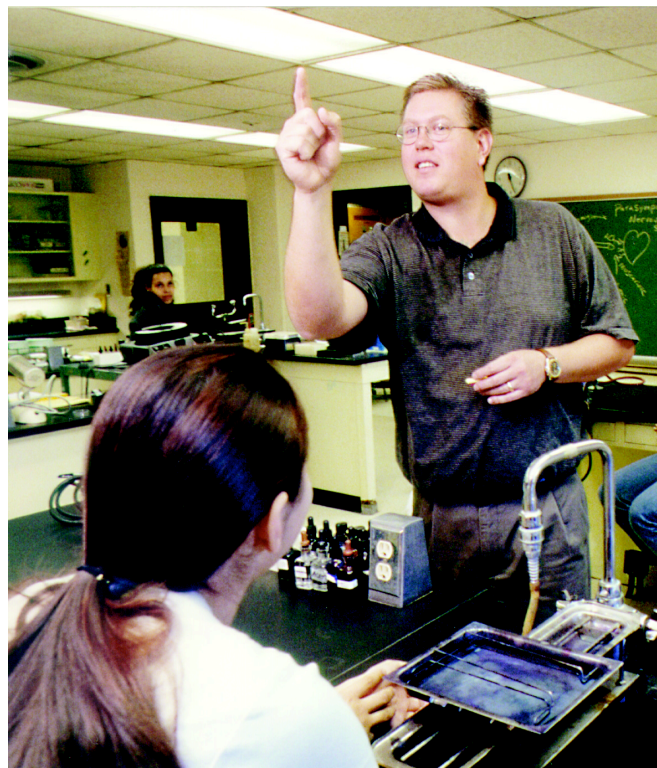
complish them. This is the first time when your reader will look for congruence, or alignment, in your thinking. Your design and implementation plans should clearly reflect and be informed by your goals. If your goals emphasize higher-level learning but your design looks like a plan for students to memorize and feed back large amounts of factual information, then your reader might conclude that you have not thought deeply about your ideas. A short narrative of a teaching situation can be quite effective in revealing your thinking about instructional design and implementation.

- ♦ What kinds of learning environments do you think can accomplish your goals?
- ♦ What is your role, and that of your students, in this design?
- ♦ What sorts of technological requirements come with your plan (from classroom laboratory design to computational infrastructure)?
- ♦ What does it look like when you implement your design?

Assessment and Evaluation

Instructors collect (assess) information from students in order to judge (evalu-

Teaching is a complex social activity that requires physical and emotional behaviors in addition to just a good idea.



Photos by Mike Olliver

ate) it. When an evaluation is summative, it results in rankings of student performance (e.g., grades) and certifies a level of competence against some standard. When an evaluation is formative, it feeds information back to students and instructors during the teaching and learning process so that corrections and improvements can be made. Summative and formative evaluation are complementary goals of assessment. No single assessment strategy can reveal all aspects of teaching and learning comprehensively, so many approaches are necessary.

Your instructional design should achieve your instructional goals, and the assessment methods you use should measure how well you have accomplished this. Readers will notice if you have congruence between your instructional goals, your instructional methods, and your assessment program. Attending to this alignment in your statement can also have an impact on the way you think about your own practice. Do you think that you should only give multiple-choice exams after each unit without collecting intermediate feedback? If so, does this follow from your teaching methods and your goals? Can you support this position with examples from your experience?

In this section as well as the “Design and Implementation” discussion, separating your comments into categories might be useful. Some faculty see clearly different demands coming from introductory undergraduate teaching, upper-level undergraduate teaching, undergraduate research, graduate teaching, graduate research, and so forth.

- ♦ What kinds of classroom assessments do you use, if you do, and why are these effective for you?
- ♦ How do students developing self-assessment skills play out in your assessment program?
- ♦ What is your experience or position on conducting classroom research on student learning?
- ♦ What are your principles for creating good examinations (and other assessment tasks), and how are these aligned with your goals and methods?
- ♦ What is your basis for assigning grades?



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Documentation and Reflection

Documentation of teaching and learning, usually via a portfolio, is relatively new in higher education. However, it is a cornerstone in the scholarship of teaching and learning (Shulman 1999; Hutchings and Shulman 1999). Increasingly, interviewees need to present evidence from their graduate teaching experiences while looking for jobs, and most assistant and associate professors need to do this for promotion.

Documentation should be gathered over time with a sense that the narrative you are constructing gives evidence of your goals, methods, and assessments. An important text piece is the running commentary, or reflection, that you should keep on your experiences and your practices. By annotating the artifacts that you collect in the context of your overall instructional plan, you can build a case for the strategies you use and simultaneously identify targets for improving your work. As with a laboratory notebook, the notes you keep about your teaching are used precisely to preserve crucial information and ideas that can be too soon forgotten when the time comes to modify or repeat an experiment.

- ♦ What have you learned about your own teaching or about student learn-

ing from examining or analyzing student work that you have woven into your instructional practices?

- ♦ What have been some of the most profound impacts on you as an educator and how have they affected your teaching?

How Is the Statement Used?

A statement of teaching philosophy has many uses, and these depend on why the statement is being written, who requests it, and who might eventually read it. As with any piece of writing, your teaching philosophy will reveal you as a person, your values, your style, and your experience. Are you sincere? Do you have integrity? Are you dogmatic and opinionated? Are you thoughtful and fair? A well-crafted statement will reveal your character.

A statement of teaching philosophy is:

- ♦ *Personal.* It should give the reader a glimpse into your motivations and practices as an instructor, your sense of values regarding teaching and learning; it should do this honestly and sincerely.
- ♦ *Political.* You should be able to defend any assertion or idea in your statement if called upon to do so.

Your institution might also begin to require these statements as part of your annual review process, or as a way to build a more comprehensive sense of a faculty about teaching and learning.

- ♦ *Metaphorical.* When you do not have the breadth of shared experience, or even the language, to describe something to an unfamiliar audience, metaphor is a useful strategy. Because your writing will reveal yourself to a reader, searching for a shared cultural experience will allow your reader to connect with your thinking.
- ♦ *Professional.* Documentation of your scholarly progress in thinking about teaching and learning issues is becoming an expected part in the life of a faculty member. A statement of teaching philosophy is the most common organizer used to introduce a course or teaching portfolio.
- ♦ *Pedagogical.* By externalizing your thinking, and particularly by sharing it with others, you are compelled to think differently about your teaching. Resolving internal inconsistencies and clarifying your thinking always

happens when you write down your ideas (this is why we value the role that editors and other reviewers have on our work). Once you have a statement, it will inevitably begin to shape the discourse in your classroom. As you write down and refine your thinking, you will want to share these ideas with students so that they can understand better your goals, your methods, and your mode(s) of assessment.

- ♦ *Reflective and Iterative.* Inevitably, you will have cause to return to your statement, perhaps because you are asked to by your department or administration, perhaps you will simply need to modify your statement as a normal consequence of reflective practice.

What Is the Structure of the Statement?

There is no consensus about the structure and content of a statement. Some institutions are providing their faculty with guidelines, while others leave it to the sensibility of the author. The following guidelines have been crafted by examining the literature on teaching philosophies and analyzing a large number of statements that are available.

A statement of teaching philosophy should be:

- ♦ between one and two pages long;
- ♦ a personal narrative;
- ♦ evidence of your sincerely held beliefs;
- ♦ representative of your experience and practice;
- ♦ a showcase for your strengths;
- ♦ a place that points to directions in your future growth; and
- ♦ an effective abstract for your teaching portfolio.

If you answer the questions detailed in the earlier sections, you will end up with more than one to two pages of text. That is good. You can use this long document

as the starting point and edit it back to a reasonable length. You will want to try to keep all of the information, but that will not be possible within the constraint of one to two pages. Study the information, draw together parts that fall under the same principles, and begin to see the commonalities in your work that you might not have otherwise known existed.

The following elements are suggested as a starting point for a statement of teaching philosophy.

Title. Identify yourself and the document, even if it is “Statement of Teaching Philosophy for Professor Leslie Jemal.” You might also use a creative title that represents your philosophy, such as “The Value of Teaching in Learning: A Statement of Teaching Philosophy by Professor Leslie Jemal.” If you publish your statement on a website, it is a good idea to include your institutional and contact information.

Quote (optional). A well-selected quotation can provide the reader with an early insight into your thinking, and this can be as powerful as a good metaphor. The quotation can be either an aphorism (proverb, maxim, saying, etc.) or a longer passage from another text that has inspired you or which represents a useful insight into your principles. You should include enough of a citation so that the reader can identify the source.

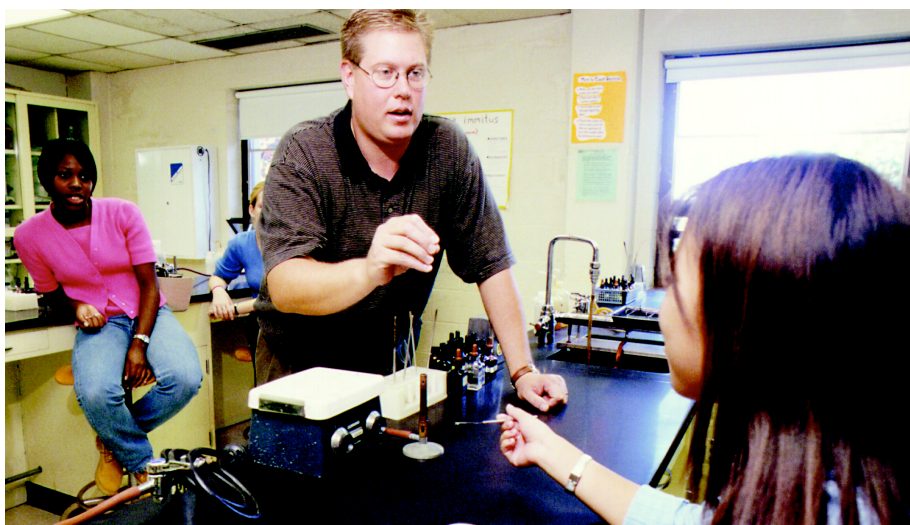
Thesis statement. In one to three declarative sentences, set out your principles. Like a good thesis statement, the rest of your statement should be geared toward reinforcing these principles as a matter of evidence and example. Sometimes it makes sense to set out your propositions as questions. If so, you must make sure you answer them clearly.

Narrative. Depending on how you see the answers to the questions in the first part of these guidelines, there are different organizational styles that you can use to tell your story. For example, you could elaborate on the three to six different principles on which your thesis statement is based. Restate the principle in basic terms and then explain what it means to you. Try to think of a

Web Resources

In writing this article, I accessed actual statements of teaching philosophy that were published by individual teachers on the web. These were uncovered by searching “teaching philosophy” on the Infoseek search engine (www.infoseek.com) and are representative.

- ♦ Feldman, J. (English Department, University of Virginia): www.trc.virginia.edu/
- ♦ Gamamick, A. (Chemistry Department, University of Maine): oldblue.umeche.maine.edu/allatich.html
- ♦ Jambekar, A.B. (Business and Economics Department, Michigan Technological University): www.sbe.mtu.edu/abjambek/phil.html
- ♦ Powell, R. (Biology Department, Avila College): www.avila.edu/departments/biology/Bobweb/2powtch.htm
- ♦ Reimer, J.A. (Chemical Engineering Department, University of California–Berkeley): reimer2.cchem.berkeley.edu/teach98.html
- ♦ Wallace, R.L. (Biology Department, Ripon College): www.ripon.edu/Faculty/WallaceR/teach.html



discipline-based example that illustrates each principle, perhaps a short snippet from a classroom event, perhaps a passage that comes from your reflective writing. Include, as needed to make your point, the kinds of assessment, documentation, and reflection that follow from or support the teaching principle that you are advocating.

You could also use the categories discussed in the first part of these guidelines (Theoretical Framework, Goals, Design and Implementation, Assessment and Evaluation, Documentation and Reflection). Yet another style might be to integrate these under categories of instructional interventions (introductory undergraduate teaching, upper-level undergraduate teaching, and so forth).

Remember that a reader is interested in understanding you and your position, in language that is accessible, and with examples that make good sense. Readers will also look for alignment, or congruence, in the different parts of your statement as a way to judge your own internal consistency, the thoughtfulness with which you have constructed your statement, and as a clue to the sincerity with which you take your teaching.

Summary. Reflecting back from the thesis statement and through the evidence you provide in the narrative, the reader should now have a rich understanding of your teaching philosophy. What are the one to three main messages that you hope a reader of your statement will take away? Here is the

opportunity to make the point that will stick in the minds of your readers.

What Is Good Advice for Writing a Statement?

Build your general literacy about teaching and learning. Many books and articles are written about education, and specifically about science education. Among many, I think the books by Brookfield (1990) and Weimer (1993) are an excellent starting point, while Palmer (1998) is a provocative starting point for faculty to begin to think of themselves as more whole and well-rounded people. The disciplinary societies have publications, journals, and conference venues for discussing issues in education (see “Professional Resources”). For readings and advice about higher education in general, there are many national organizations to consider: American Association for Higher Education, The Association of American Colleges and Universities, and The Preparing Future Faculty Program are all useful resources.

Consult with a teaching and learning center. Centers for teaching and learning or teaching excellence can be found on

most campuses today. They can provide numerous resources to individuals, often including the opportunity to set up campuswide workshops on writing statements of teaching philosophies.

If your campus does not have such a resource, or even if it does, you can also find a variety of useful online resources provided by teaching and learning centers at most of the major institutions in the world.

Read some teaching statements. As described earlier, some of these guidelines were developed by examining and analyzing actual statements written by faculty members who had published them on their websites.

Share and critique. Do not work in isolation. Share your statement with others. If you are not part of a group that is willing to do this with each other, then rely on friends whom you trust to give you honest, constructive feedback. If you work in an open intellectual environment, ask permission to visit classes led by others (faculty and graduate students alike), then take notes and create questions for that person. Invite

Professional Resources

The following journals and professional organizations are of interest to science education and higher education in general:

- ♦ *Journal of College Science Teaching* (National Science Teachers Association): www.nsta.org.
- ♦ *Journal of Chemical Education* (Chemical Education Division of the American Chemical Society): jchemed.chem.wisc.edu/
- ♦ *The Chemical Educator* (Springer-Verlag): journals.springer-ny.com/chedr
- ♦ *American Journal of Physics* (American Association of Physics Teachers): www.amherst.edu/~ajp/
- ♦ *Physics Education News* (American Institute of Physics): www.aip.org/enews/pen/
- ♦ The American Association of Higher Education (AAHE): www.aahe.org/
- ♦ The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU): www.aacu-edu.org/
- ♦ The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (CF): www.carnegiefoundation.org
- ♦ The Preparing Future Faculty Program (PFF): www.preparing-faculty.org/

them out for coffee and ask them your questions.

Write more than you need and edit.

With the goal of one to two pages, your statement might start out as eight to ten pages if your answer thoroughly all of the questions posed earlier in these guidelines. Answer all of these questions in the first round of writing and edit a copy of the document. You will find that the longer answers and examples can be a good starting point for other writing and thinking about your teaching.

Write in a personal way. Your statement is a first-person narrative, not a journal article on teaching and learning. Make sure your readers are able to understand you.

Do not try to be perfect or complete. A statement of teaching philosophy is always a work in progress. Every new teaching and learning situation has the opportunity to impact your statement because of the new experience. Your statement should be a simple, declarative position statement of who you are as a teacher at the moment you write it.

Include the future. Everyone should acknowledge areas where they need to learn and grow. Do not hesitate to include any new actions and areas of interest that have resulted from your experiences. Be careful, though, not to overemphasize your ignorance of something that might be a reasonable expectation for you to know. Addressing the future is best in terms of an action plan.

Be informed about your audience. This simple principle of good writing cannot be ignored. The statement you write for a job application might differ from institution to institution depending on the aspects of yourself you want to emphasize. Certainly, constructing a statement for personal use will differ from one that is requested from the institution for whatever political purposes are operating.

Consider “hot button” areas carefully. Be aware that departments and individuals may have had varying levels of success with novel teaching strategies such as group learning, teaching modules, instructional technology, and the lecture-less classroom. As in research, if you choose to highlight your advocacy for controversial ideas, you

should also be prepared to polarize some audiences and engage in some lively discussions with your detractors.

Avoid technical terms and jargon.

Be aware that most of your audience will not have a background that will allow you to use many terms from educational psychology or educational theory. If you do, be sure that you know what the ideas are and explain them carefully as part of your text.

The most important audience for your statement of teaching philosophy is yourself. Because we all have teaching philosophies, writing these down makes us understand ourselves better and can hopefully improve and refine our skills as educators. If you can share your statement in an open, critical environment, then it can also become a catalyst for meaningful conversations about teaching and learning in your discipline and in your institution.

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