

COMMENTARY

Teaching Philosophy Statements: How Do I Develop Them?

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Recommended citation:

Wu, S. M. (2016). Teaching philosophy statements: How do I develop them?. *Asian Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 6(2), 143-152.

Teaching Philosophy Statements: How Do I Develop Them?

A recent attendance at a Talking about Teaching and Learning (TATAL) workshop during the 2016 conference organised by the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) helped me understand how a Teaching Philosophy Statement (TPS) can be systematically developed. This commentary shares some pointers learnt about writing TPSs.

TPSs are written for various personal, professional or pedagogical purposes. These statements are usually prepared as part of a teaching dossier, which is a professional document providing evidence of one's beliefs and practices about teaching and learning, one's teaching abilities and significant teaching-related experiences, including curricular and materials design as well as classroom experiences. TPSs usually then form the foundation from which one rationalises one's pedagogical mission, approaches, methodologies and goals in one's professional path as an educator. They undergird one's teaching practices and provide that platform from which we understand why we do what we do as university classroom practitioners so that there can be that necessary space for thinking systematically through or reflecting on our classroom practices – whether it be in the conceptual design of programme curriculum and materials, or in the classroom practices of teaching, facilitating learning and assessing.

A TPS is a systematic and critical rationale that puts focus on important components defining effective teaching and learning in a particular discipline and/or institution (Schönwetter, Sokal, Friesen & Wetter, 2002, p. 84). It can be described as a narrative of your beliefs, values, rationale, and insights into learning and teaching. It describes how your teaching beliefs and ideas are enacted in your teaching practice, and how your teaching practice can influence your students' learning.

Nancy Van Note Chism, Professor of Education at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) notes that the articulation and intermittent reshaping of these statements are personally and pedagogically beneficial as “[r]eviewing and revising former statements of teaching philosophy can help teachers to reflect on their growth and renew their dedication to the goals and values that they hold” (Vanderbilt University Centre for Teaching, n.d.).

TSPs could be aimed at articulating the following necessary elements so that there is a sense of completeness in the portrayal of one's educator self to enable others to understand our teaching practices:

- Your conception of how learning occurs
- A description of how your teaching facilitates student learning
- A reflection of why you teach the way you do
- The goals you have for yourself and for your students
- How your teaching enacts your beliefs and goals
- What, for you, constitutes evidence of student learning
- The ways in which you create an inclusive learning environment
- Your interests in new techniques, activities, and types of learning

(Source: Vanderbilt University Centre for Teaching, n.d.)

There are three main frameworks to guide the writing of TPSs, namely Schönwetter's Framework (2002), Chism's Framework (1998) and Metaphors. Of the three, I would like to recommend Chism's framework to guide one's articulation of TPSs with a sense of completeness.

Chism (1998) describes the five main components of a teaching philosophy as being descriptions of how teachers think about learning and teaching, their role, goals for students, and the actions they should take (pp. 1-3).

1. CONCEPTUALISATION OF LEARNING

Ask yourself questions such as "What do we mean by learning?" and "What happens in a learning situation?" Think of your answers to these questions based on your personal experience. Some teachers try to express and explain their understanding of learning through metaphors, because drawing comparisons with known entities can stimulate thinking, whether or not the metaphor is actually used in the statement. On the other hand, most instructors tend to take a more direct approach, describing what they think occurs during a learning episode, based on their observations, experience or what they read from the literature.

2. CONCEPTUALISATION OF TEACHING

Ask yourself questions such as “What do we mean by teaching?” and “How do I facilitate this process as a teacher?” Include personal teaching beliefs on how you facilitate the learning process. The metaphor format can be used, but a common practice is a more direct description of the nature of a teacher with respect to motivating and facilitating learning. Also address issues such as how to challenge students intellectually and support them academically and how you respond to different learning styles, help students who are frustrated, and accommodate different abilities. Furthermore, talk about how you as a teacher have come to these conclusions (e.g., past experience or as a result of what you read from the literature).

3. GOALS FOR STUDENTS

Describe what skills you expect students to obtain as the result of learning. Address such issues as what goals you set for your classes, what the rationale behind them is, what kind of activities you try to implement in class in order to reach these goals, and how the goals have changed over time as you learn more about teaching and learning.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PHILOSOPHY

Illustrate how one’s concepts about teaching and learning and goals for students are transformed into classroom activities. Ask yourself, “How do I operationalise my philosophy of teaching in the classroom?” and “What personal characteristics in myself or my students influence the way in which I approach teaching?” Reflect on how you present yourself and course materials, what activities, assignments, and projects you implement in the teaching-learning process, and how you interact with students in and outside class.

5. PROFESSIONAL GROWTH PLAN

It is important to continue professional growth, and to do so, you need to set clear goals and means to accomplish these goals. Think about questions such as “What goals have I set for myself as a teacher?” and “How do I accomplish these goals?” Illustrate how you have professionally grown over the years, what challenges exist at the present, what long-term development goals you have projected, and what you will do to reach these goals.

I re-present below a Teaching Philosophy Statement and reflections on the statement written by Dr John Gilchrist (2016, personal communication) as a sample statement that encapsulates all five elements of Chism’s framework. I have also included some comments about the sample statement, which are presented in parentheses as “Commentary author’s remarks”:

Table 1

Teaching philosophy and personal reflections that prompted parts of the statement by John Gilchrist

Teaching Philosophy Statement	Writer’s Reflections
<p>A Spanish architect, Jose Antonio Coderch told the Pritzker prize winner Glenn Murcutt ‘I tell my students you must put into your work, first, effort, secondly, love and finally—and I must say, very Catholic Spanish—suffering’.</p> <p><i>(Commentary author’s remarks: Conceptualisation of learning- what it takes to learn—embodied in a quotation.)</i></p> <p>My outlook to teaching rests on a number of human and discipline factors. First there is beauty in ideas and the construction of human knowledge. I think it is important for students to be stimulated into being able to understand, analyse, use and critically review existing knowledge within the discipline they are being taught and to be encouraged in finding new knowledge.</p> <p><i>(Commentary author’s remarks: Conceptualisation of teaching—what it means to teach: knowledge needs to be constructed, knowledge has to be discovered through processes of comprehension, analysis and critical review of existing knowledge.)</i></p> <p>The ultimate goal is to achieve a curiosity, a desire, for lifelong learning. As Plutarch said in 109 AD ‘The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled’.</p> <p><i>(Commentary author’s remarks: Goals for students articulated and use of metaphor to explicate the statement of goals: curiosity and lifelong learning as target; the use of a metaphor illustrates the role of the teacher in kindling interest, albeit latent in students into a fire that can then subsist and burn on its own.)</i></p>	<p>GLENN MURCUTT</p> <p>The Spaniards say he was a very tough man. To me, he was just so gentle. And he said... we got into conversation about all sorts of areas - of religion, of, of what was happening in music today and architecture was significant discussion, of course. And he said to me, he said, “I must tell you, I am 62 and with every new building, I am still very nervous. I am very anxious.” That was, to me, a total release of my innermost fears that I saw, all around me, all my peers, with the greatest of confidence designing this work and I think, “Jesus, I’m so nervous about it all.” He also said to me, “I tell my students you must put into your work, first, effort, secondly, love and finally - and I must say, very Catholic Spanish - suffering.” That interview with Peter Thompson on the ABC (2/6/2008) also released my innermost fears and encapsulated my often over-conscientious spirit which drives my teaching.</p>

Secondly it is important for me to instill a sense of support and confidence in that journey of acquiring knowledge and to treat students with respect and fairness in doing so. And thirdly it is also important to instill a sense of professionalism and responsibility in students for their learning, to challenge them into higher levels of achievement and as necessary to provide gauges of achievement to enable them to feel they have mastered what they have learnt.

(Commentary author's remarks: Goals for students which verge more on the emotional and attitudinal dimensions articulated.)

Professionalism and responsibility carry with them an acceptance of the need for labour and effort expended, which at times may be painful: 'may your hard work be justly rewarded'.

(Commentary author's remarks: Elements of the implementation of the philosophy are found here: the kind of learning environment that needs to be created to effect learning—one that shows support, respect, fairness and one that builds confidence. A sense of responsibility and professionalism needs to be instilled so that students take ownership of their learning and achievements.)

My teaching metaphor is that I feel like a guide directing students down a path, and walking with them to encourage them not to stray off the path and to understand why and where they are going.

(Commentary author's remarks: The use of another metaphor helps to illustrate the conceptualisation of teaching. Here, the role of a guide in corralling the directions of the learners reflects the writer's role as a teacher in shaping students' learning journey.)

It is important to establish a collegial atmosphere, a supportive learning environment (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Ramsden, 1992). I seek to learn something of the student's background, interests and perceptions of their own learning skills. I encourage students to consult with each other as well as me and to widely read. I regularly say to students there are no stupid questions in my class—feel free to make mistakes—you will learn from them. I also challenge them with learning goals, to provide some sense of achievement in the journey they are taking.

I have an eclectic view of approaches to teaching—there is no one single formula.

(Commentary author's remarks: Elements of the conceptualisation of teaching and learning are found here—elements in an environment that enable effective teaching and learning. It is useful to undergird such fundamental beliefs with sources of citations in education literature.)

I adopt a variety of educational techniques to best achieve learning goals, depending on the nature of the content of the unit and the learning outcomes I seek to achieve. For example, one seminar based unit is interactive and based on a series of exercises which are progressively graded in difficulty, and I encourage group work and working with different people (which has parallels in professional life); another approach is explained and justified to students in the initial class and is based on a range of professional situations such as appearing before a magistrate or before a partner in a law firm in the settling of advices, and uses strict Socratic dialogue to test students conceptual understanding of the unit and to encourage student responsibility for their own learning.

I think students respond to example. A lazy teacher will encourage lazy students.

(Commentary author's remarks: Elements of the implementation of one's philosophy are presented here; how ideas are operationalised to facilitate students' learning and to effect one's belief about teaching.)

I feel part of a dynamic which looks for improvement. This stimulates me and reduces sluggish performance.

I seek to achieve a constructive alignment between learning environment, learning outcomes and assessment (Biggs & Tang, 2007).

Also consider it important that I strive to do better, to improve the learning experience for students and to do so in fulfilment of my own sense of professionalism.

I take criticisms seriously.
I too lightly dismiss praise.

I seek to improve my teaching performance through reflection, discussions with fellow and co-teachers, through student feedback and scholarly engagement with peers in other institutions, both local and overseas.

I strive to innovate and evolve approaches to teaching to seek improved student performance on learning outcomes, to remedy perceived weaknesses brought into a unit or apparent in the delivery of the unit and to keep up to date with professional and technological change.

(Commentary author's remarks: These are statements that reflect the professional development goals of the teacher. These statements identify various aspects of and strategies with which to develop one's teaching capacity. Again the use of literature to undergird one's rationale substantiate the ideas proposed.)

Two features that help effectiveness in this TPS are the use of metaphors, and the use of citations to illustrate one's ideas and to support the rationale for one's beliefs respectively. Metaphors are good literary devices that create that connection between what is familiar and that which is not so familiar, so that one's understanding or imagery of the familiar will help explain/describe the less familiar. As such, the idea of kindling a fire helps explain the role of a teacher in kindling students' curiosity and interest so that the concrete act of kindling a fire makes the abstract nature of triggering curiosity and interest more concrete. Further alignments between the two acts can be explicated in the statement to identify clearly the role of the teacher in the learning process using this analogy.

Schonell et al. (2016) provide four questions which, when answered, will help illustrate the conceptualisation of teaching clearer through the use of metaphors:

1. What metaphor describes you as a teacher?
2. Explain how this metaphor characterises you as a teacher.
3. Which example(s) from your teaching experience can illustrate your metaphor.
4. In what way(s) does this metaphor guide your teaching?

The other feature of citing relevant sources to support aspects of one's statement undergirds rationales, practices and strategies in a scholarly manner. Frequently, these sources provide the theoretical perspectives to rationalise related teaching and learning behaviours including learning goals, approaches and strategies adopted, assessment practices, conceptualisation and the design of courses and materials. These teaching and learning theories are important fulcrums that ensure strong justifications for the teaching and learning behaviour articulated.

There are indeed various ways to present one's philosophy of teaching and the above sample is but one instance of an effective TPS. Generally, the TPS provides insights into one's conceptualisation of teaching, learning, goals, implementation of philosophy and professional development. These statements when articulated, reviewed and reshaped intermittently reflect an educator's developmental trajectory, dynamic and often, progressive over time.

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WU Siew Mei is the Director of the Centre for English Language Communication. Her research interests include investigations into the nature of academic writing, objective testing in large scale English language proficiency assessment and the validation of test descriptors. She has published in the *HERDSA* journal, *AJSOTL*, *Reflections on English Language Teaching*, the *Regional English Language Centre Journal*, *PROSPECT* (an Australian TESOL journal) and *English for Academic Purposes Journal*. She is currently a member of the Editorial Board for *AJSOTL*.

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