Activity: Study and evaluate a sample teaching philosophy statement (1)

Background of this example

Dr Chen Jiang graduated from Johns Hopkins University with a PhD in English Language. He is currently an assistant professor in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at a research-intensive university in Asia.

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<th>Teaching philosophy statement</th>
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<td>1. As pointed out in the brief sections above, I teach academic writing in a large, research-intensive public university in Asia. This location is important, as will become apparent below; equally important is the fact that my disciplinary expertise as an educator lies in the domain of language and writing. In the next couple of pages I outline the teaching philosophy that I believe shapes the quality of my work both inside and outside the classroom, and I discuss its impact on student learning. I highlight the most significant learning outcomes I hope my students will achieve and the ways in which I attempt to help them to achieve these outcomes.</td>
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<td>2. First of all, I want to emphasize that I believe to be a successful teacher at university level it is important to integrate the three different components of my work as an academic: my teaching, service, and research are closely intertwined. Since I see scholarship as consisting not only of research but also teaching, while my main focus in this portfolio is on my contributions to teaching I will throughout allude also to my research contributions. Because a philosophy obviously needs to translate into practice, I will relate the abstract principles articulated here to practical examples drawn from my teaching. For elaboration of these I refer the reader to the reflective case narratives which follow this teaching philosophy statement, where I further describe and analyse examples that I merely mention here.</td>
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<td>3. As a university teacher in the twenty-first century, in one of the most dynamic regions of the world and in a country which aims to develop its most precious resource—people—I believe that one of our central challenges as educators is to help foster students’ ability to think for themselves. Given the various issues confronting us today—climate change, increased global competition, terrorism, dizzying developments in technology, to name only some of the most significant—young people need to be equipped with the necessary skills, attitudes and behaviours to discover their own questions and make their own connections, if they are to contribute in innovative and responsible ways, as leaders, to solving contemporary problems. In the courses I have designed and taught I therefore try to assist</td>
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students in generating their own questions on the topics we study: my most fundamental belief as a teacher is that my role is that of supporting student learning. What this means concretely is that I aim to prepare students so they can pose worthwhile questions that they will then, eventually, learn to pursue independently in the process of research.

These are questions which need to be worth asking, and to which students need to try to find their own answers: asking questions and producing independent research are thus fundamental to my teaching. This means that I see my role as a teacher as not primarily consisting of transmitting knowledge but, rather, as guiding students in such a way that they will reflect on the various topics we are studying. That is, they need to internalize knowledge in order thereby to make it their own and, crucially, so they can question what they are learning. It is therefore fundamentally important that we find ways of encouraging deep approaches to learning that will enable students to move towards the relational and extended abstract levels of the SOLO taxonomy (Biggs, 1999). While students need to be able to remember and describe the facts I transmit to them, that cannot be enough. They also need to move beyond such basic knowledge towards analysing, comparing, applying and indeed at the highest level, reflecting and questioning. It is for this reason that I aim to guide students to discover ways of approaching topics critically, ask their own questions in order to identify problems, and come up with hypotheses that will enable them to move towards solving the problems and questions they have identified.

A key way in which I encourage such questioning is by striving to create a classroom climate that is optimal for learning. I believe that such a climate is crucial for deep learning to occur. As John Hattie has argued, this involves generating “an atmosphere of trust — a climate in which it is understood that it is okay to make mistakes, because mistakes are the essence of learning” (Hattie 2012, p.26). What this means concretely is that one should find ways of developing a community of learning. I do this in a number of ways. Perhaps the most important strategy is that of regular small-group discussions, in which students do peer work, ask questions about the texts we are reading and problems we are discussing, and explain to one another key points.

Students who take my courses are exceptional: they have undergone a rigorous selection process before being admitted into the programme. However, a key challenge that I face relates to the diversity of the students who enrol for my classes. This is not a problem that directly maps onto Biggs’s discussion of ‘academic Susan’ and ‘non-academic Robert’ (1999, pp. 57-59) in that their commitment is not in question: it is probably true that most, if not all, of my students take a deep approach to learning. The challenge
has more to do with the diversity in disciplines and levels of expertise, since I teach in a liberal arts type setting with students who come from a range of disciplines and seniority. It can be especially hard to manage this kind of diversity, which I try to do by means of peer learning and feedback. This works well, though I do not assess the students for group work given that "Confucian-heritage students are generally well disposed towards working, but not necessarily towards being assessed, in groups" (Carless, 2015, p.53). Another way in which I try to create community is through the class blog; I elaborate on both these strategies in the reflective case narratives below.

7 I did not invent the above approaches; instead, I have sought to develop my teaching through collaboration with top institutions of higher learning, for instance Harvard and Stanford, whether through student blogging; online meetings on pedagogy; or campus visits. Through this work, and learning from highly experienced experts, I have sought to create cutting-edge modules that draw on the best work available in the teaching of writing and rhetoric, while adapting it to local requirements. I have tried to share my teaching practice by contributing to the professional development of my colleagues, in particular new faculty; to this end I have helped to mentor junior colleagues by providing advice and an open door so they can discuss challenges that might arise. Increasingly, I am also trying to underpin my practice with relevant education scholarship as I believe that I should base my approach not just on experience (though that is valuable), but that scholarship can save me time in the long run as I do not have to reinvent the wheel; for example, I am glad I read the above-mentioned study by Carless in which he alludes to group assessment, as otherwise I would wasted a lot of time trying out a strategy that is unlikely to work! When it comes to impact, in what follows I will discuss two cases to demonstrate my approach and analyse evidence that suggests my students as well as colleagues value what I do. I will provide examples of what I do to provide feedback to students with reference to actual student work.

References

