Resources and practices to help graduate students and postdoctoral fellows write statements of teaching philosophy

Katherine D. Kearns1 and Carol Subiño Sullivan2

1Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning and 2Department of Anthropology, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

Received 24 November 2010; Accepted 5 January 2011

Kearns KD, Sullivan CS. Resources and practices to help graduate students and postdoctoral fellows write statements of teaching philosophy. Adv Physiol Educ 35: 136–145, 2011; doi:10.1152/advan.00123.2010.—Graduate students and postdoctoral fellows currently encounter requests for a statement of teaching philosophy in at least half of academic job announcements in the United States. A systematic process for the development of a teaching statement is required that integrates multiple sources of support, informs writers of the document’s purpose and audience, helps writers produce thoughtful statements, and encourages meaningful reflection on teaching and learning. This article for faculty mentors and instructional consultants synthesizes practices for mentoring graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and junior faculty members as they prepare statements of teaching philosophy. We review background information on purposes and audiences, provide writing resources, and synthesize empirical research on the use of teaching statements in academic job searches. In addition, we integrate these resources into mentoring processes that have helped graduate students in a Health Sciences Pedagogy course to collaboratively and critically examine and write about their teaching. This summary is intended for faculty mentors and instructional consultants who want to refine current resources or establish new mentoring programs. This guide also may be useful to graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and junior faculty members, especially those who lack mentoring or who seek additional resources, as they consider the many facets of effective teaching.

Purpose and Uses of Statements of Teaching Philosophy

The statement of teaching philosophy (also called the teaching statement or teaching philosophy statement) promotes reflective practice by encouraging instructors to describe their teaching methods, to justify why they use those methods, to analyze the effectiveness of those methods, and to consider how they might appropriately modify those methods in future courses (24, 27). In particular, writers of teaching statements support a claim about their teaching approach and effectiveness by reflecting on evidence they have documented themselves or evidence from students or colleagues (Fig. 1) (27). The teaching statement is often presented as part of a teaching portfolio or dossier as a narrative that explains and highlights an appended collection of evidence documenting successful teaching (27). Some argue that the teaching statement in this context becomes “the pedagogical equivalent of the scholarly paper, a
In the current academic job market, graduate students and postdoctoral fellows are increasingly asked to include a teaching statement as part of their job applications (8, 19, 25). In 2002, about 10% of >1,300 academic job descriptions in North America included requests for a teaching philosophy statement (25). More recently, in a 2005 survey of over 400 search committee chairs in six disciplines (biology, chemistry, English, history, political science, and psychology) in the United States, 54% of departments at doctoral institutions and 62% of departments at bachelor’s institutions reported using the teaching philosophy statement at some point during the hiring process. Furthermore, hiring committees in the natural sciences were much more likely to require teaching philosophy statements (80% of natural science departments responding) than committees in the humanities or social sciences (both 50%) (16, 19). In mathematics, one-third to two-thirds of hiring departments in the United States requested teaching philosophy statements depending on the institutional type (8). It is probable in the current academic job market that graduate students and postdoctoral fellows will be required to prepare a teaching statement for job candidacy. However, even if a position does not ask for a teaching statement, articulation of a teaching philosophy may prepare candidates to describe their teaching more effectively during the actual interview. For example, one of our graduate students enrolled in a faculty-taught Health Sciences Pedagogy course described in an interview how the teaching statement and teaching portfolio assignments prepared her to answer specific questions about her teaching during her academic job interview:

“I was asked specific questions, during the interview, which I had already thought about as a result of working on the teaching statement and teaching portfolio. I felt more prepared because I had already spent a great deal of time reflecting about how I teach, how students learn differently, and how I address these concerns. The interviewers didn’t comment specifically on the teaching statement and teaching portfolio, but it was clear that they understood the range of my experience based on those documents.”

Graduate student, Medical Sciences

This student’s comments about her interview experience reflect the many personal and professional benefits served by faculty mentorship throughout a trainee’s career in the preparation, articulation, and documentation of a philosophy of teaching.

Resources for Writing a Statement of Teaching Philosophy

To adequately prepare their graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and junior faculty members for both explicit and implicit expectations of the academic job market, mentors can refer their trainees to many web-based (Table 1) and print guides for writing the teaching philosophy statement. These writing resources usually include general descriptions about what a teaching statement is and should do as well as concrete

---

1 All quotations from graduate students in this article come from interviews with students in a Health Sciences Pedagogy course who agreed to participate in a study about the influence of a pedagogy course on long-term graduate student development (for details, see Refs. 14 and 17). These graduate students engaged in workshops, peer mentoring, and one-on-one consultation with instructional consultants and their faculty instructors while preparing a teaching philosophy statement and teaching portfolio as course assignments. Approval for conducting interviews with the graduate students and for examining their course work was obtained from our institution’s Human Research Protections Program, and students completed consent forms.
guidelines, questions, and examples to cultivate the writing process. Faculty mentors can direct their trainees to teaching statement guides targeted to writers in specific disciplines such as science (2, 11) and math (15); other guides provide general advice for writers in any discipline (6, 9, 13, 20–22, 27). Overall, these various guides advise authors to address the following four essential categories of the teaching/learning process. Faculty mentors can direct their trainees to teaching statement guides targeted to writers in specific disciplines such as science (2, 11) and math (15); other guides provide general advice for writers in any discipline (6, 9, 13, 20–22, 27). Overall, these various guides advise authors to address the following four essential categories of the teaching/learning process:

Learning goals. The author identifies the discipline-specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes that s/he believes are important for students' academic, personal, and professional success. Teaching methods. The author describes specific teaching methods and explains how they contribute to students' accomplishment of the learning goals and how the methods are aligned with diverse student expectations and needs. Furthermore, the author explains how these methods reveal the respective responsibilities of the student and the teacher. The author also relates his/her personal qualities and values to the choice and implementation of teaching methods.

Learning assessment. The author describes and rationalizes the specific tools s/he uses to assess student learning (e.g., exams, papers, posters, and presentations). The author analyzes the outcomes of these assessments to determine whether his/her learning goals have been achieved using those teaching methods.

Teaching assessment. The author identifies strengths and areas of improvement as a teacher based on evidence from multiple sources (e.g., learning assessments, student evaluations, and peer/supervisor observations). The author also proposes a plan to continue his/her teaching development. Clay (10) argues that overly precise instructions might reduce the potential for the candidate to assert his/her exceptional and unique ideas about teaching and learning:

“But how are committees supposed to figure out who we really are? Most of what we submit to them—the vita, the research statement, the cover letter—is fairly formulaic and therefore gives relatively little sense of the person writing it. If a committee gave specific guidelines for the teaching statement, it would probably end up with something equally formulaic.”

However, these resources can be informative for mentors and can reduce their trainees' frustration, anxiety, or even unpreparedness with vague requests for a "teaching philosophy statement."
statement” or “evidence of teaching effectiveness” in course assignments and academic job announcements (10, 23).

**Process-Based Mentoring Strategies**

While how-to guides can be helpful in addressing the basic content of a teaching philosophy statement, a recursive and collaborative writing process involving guidance and feedback from multiple sources can positively influence the writer’s reflective teaching practice as well as the content and readability of a statement. Graduate students and postdoctoral fellows may encounter structured and supportive writing environments within graduate pedagogy courses, teaching certificate programs, and preparing future faculty programs, which usually incorporate a teaching philosophy statement writing assignment (7, 18, 25, 28, 29). Graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and junior faculty members may also receive more informal guidance while composing teaching philosophy statements from peers, faculty mentors, and instructional consultants. Here, we describe our processes that integrate both formal and informal structures to familiarize our graduate students and postdoctoral fellows with the genre of the teaching philosophy statement, model a variety of writing formats, and provide feedback to writers. Faculty mentors and instructional consultants can adapt these processes to their own institutional context to help their trainees articulate their teaching philosophies.

**Introducing the teaching philosophy statement.** On our campus, faculty mentors and instructional consultants collaboratively facilitate workshops about teaching philosophy statements in discipline-based graduate pedagogy courses. Instructional consultants also facilitate a similar two-part campus-wide workshop for graduate students and postdoctoral fellows in mid-September and mid-February of every year. In these workshops, participants are guided through an analysis of sample teaching statements to familiarize them with the purpose, audience, content, and style of this genre. Faculty mentors regularly participate in these discussions and contribute their perspectives and analyses of the sample teaching statements.

In both our course-based and public workshops, graduate student and postdoctoral fellows first listen to a brief introduction to the purpose and audience for statement of teaching philosophy as summarized above. The participants then imagine themselves as members of a fictional, multidisciplinary academic search committee whose task is to read two 2-page teaching statements composed by graduate students in two different disciplines and respond to two questions: 1) What do you believe you know about the author’s teaching? and 2) What do you want to know more about the author’s teaching? Through this brainstorming activity, participants uncover a list of questions to be addressed in an effective teaching statement; these questions are summarized in a handout that we provide after the workshop activity (Table 2). This handout also provides citations for print and web-based resources about writing a teaching philosophy statement (Table 1) (2, 9, 11, 13, 15, 20–22, 27).

In addition to exploring the typical content of a teaching philosophy statement, the graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and faculty mentors in the workshop assess the extent to which each teaching statement exemplifies the qualities that search committees use to define successful statements (8, 19). For instance, the writers incorporate specific examples to illustrate how the candidate applies his or her philosophy, which helps search committee members envision themselves in the writer’s classroom. Moreover, the writers reveal reflective teaching practice by explaining their rationales for teaching methods and by describing specific outcomes of their instruction. The writers’ teaching statements are selective and concise, containing only the highlights of each writer’s teaching in about two pages. The writers respond to the readers’ institutional missions and student body compositions by incorporating examples of relevant experience. For example, some writers describe experiences with teaching service and general education courses, providing evidence for both their commitment to teaching and their capacity to respond to students of different levels, learning styles, abilities, and motivations. The teaching statements exhibit an informal writing style that draws upon personal experiences and refers to the first-person point of view, unlike the familiar forms of disciplinary writing, such as journal articles and academic books. Finally, the writers use organized and engaging writing styles that are free from jargon, buzzwords, and banal or empty phrases, thereby conveying their enthusiasm and sincerity toward teaching.

These sample statements, composed by previous teaching center clients who were successful in the job market, are part of a larger local collection of teaching statements used in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Handout from the “Teaching Philosophy Statements for Job Seekers” workshop: Essential questions to address in a teaching philosophy statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning goals</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What interests you about your discipline?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What do you hope students will appreciate about your discipline?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What knowledge, skills, and attitudes are important for student success in your discipline?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How are these disciplinary knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to students’ academic, personal, and professional success?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teaching methods</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What do you see as the relationship between the student and the teacher?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What do you see as the respective responsibilities of the student and the teacher?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How are these relationships and responsibilities reflected in your teaching methods?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How do these methods contribute to your learning goals for students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Why are these teaching methods appropriate for use in your discipline?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What pedagogical resources (disciplinary and general) support your teaching methods?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How are your teaching methods attentive to diverse student expectations and needs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How do your personal characteristics and values relate to your choice and implementation of your teaching methods?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment of student learning</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What learning assessment tools do you use (e.g., tests, papers, portfolios, and/or journals) and why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How do you know your learning goals are being achieved using your teaching methods?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What do the learning assessments say about your teaching?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment of teaching</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What do your teaching assessments say about your teaching?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What are your strengths as a teacher?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How will you improve students’ achievement of these learning goals?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What aspects of your teaching are you working on now?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How We Teach

MENTORING TEACHING STATEMENT DEVELOPMENT

Modeling teaching philosophy statement formats. Through workshops, discussions, and one-on-one guidance, faculty mentors and professional staff can provide models and exercises to help graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and junior faculty members identify a comfortable and stylistically interesting format. Such models also help these writers to revise their statements so they encompass more than a simple collection of declarative or boiler-plate statements about teaching.

In our workshops, participants analyze and discuss the formats of the two sample statements and then practice writing about their teaching using exercises that model several different formats. One of the statements used in our public and pedagogy course-based workshops is an example of the five-paragraph essay format. This organization for a teaching philosophy statement has one introductory paragraph that establishes the principal learning goals for the writer’s students, three expository paragraphs demonstrating in discrete, concrete ways how the writer creates a learning environment to accomplish the learning goals, and one final paragraph that summarizes the previous ideas and poses future developments for the writer’s teaching. Many of our clients, as both writers and readers of teaching philosophy statements, find the five-paragraph essay format reassuringly familiar. Many graduate students and postdoctoral fellows pursue this organization for their own statements.

Recognizing that the five-paragraph essay format may not suit all authors of teaching philosophy statements, we provide writers with several formats that our office has developed (Table 3) in addition to the brainstorming exercises compiled by the Center for Teaching Excellence of Duquesne University (http://www.duq.edu/cte/academic-careers/teaching-philosophy.cfm) (Table 4) (12).

These writing exercises describe different formats to capture a

Table 3. Sample teaching philosophy statement writing formats used in our campus-wide and departmental workshops as well as one-on-one consultations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Five-paragraph essay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the first paragraph, establish the thesis or argument about your teaching effectiveness: How would you characterize your teaching? What is important for students to take away from your classes? In three subsequent paragraphs, describe specific teaching moments that illustrate this thesis, paying attention to each phase of the teaching/learning cycle: learning goals, teaching methods, learning assessment, and teaching assessment. In the final paragraph, analyze your overall teaching effectiveness and propose future teaching developments.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Great moments

Think about a moment in your classroom when you and the students were having a great time. Write about that “great moment” using the following series of questions: What was the topic and activity during which this great moment happened? What was the goal of the activity? How did you structure the activity? What did students do during the activity? How could you demonstrate that the activity resulted in significant student learning? How does this great moment exemplify what you value about your discipline and your personal and instructional style? [From Ref. 22a.]

Great and not-so-great moments

In addition to writing about a “great moment,” write about a moment when you were not satisfied about how a class went. What was the topic and activity during which this not-so-great moment happened? What was the goal of the activity? How did you structure the activity? What did students do during the activity? Why was this activity a not-so-great moment? Rather than thinking about this event as an anomaly, think about why similar teaching strategies would work in one instance and not in another instance. How do both the great moment and not-so-great-moment exemplify what you value about your discipline and your personal and instructional style? [From Ref. 22a.]

The story

Usually featured as the first paragraph of the statement, “the story” refers to a pivotal moment, either in your own learning or in your teaching. The story could also be about your life before you came to graduate school. The rest of your statement should incorporate descriptions of specific teaching moments that reflect how your teaching has been influenced in specific ways by that event or career and that pay attention to each phase of the teaching/learning cycle (learning goals, teaching methods, learning assessment, and teaching assessment).

The metaphor

Establish a metaphor in the opening paragraph. The rest of your statement should incorporate descriptions of specific teaching moments that reflect how your teaching is related to this metaphor and that pay attention to each phase of the teaching/learning cycle (learning goals, teaching methods, learning assessment, and teaching assessment).
philosophy of teaching while addressing the essential questions. During workshops and one-on-one sessions, we encourage graduate students and postdoctoral fellows to jot down ideas, keywords, and phrases for three or four exercises that feel accessible as teaching statement formats. Writers then explore these ideas further by talking with another workshop participant or with the consultant. On their own time, the writers fill out their thoughts into complete sentences and cohesive paragraphs using one of those formats.

Structural analysis of sample teaching statements and exercises complement the workshop handout as processes for mentoring graduate students and postdoctoral fellows as they compose and revise their own statements. Graduate students in the Health Sciences Pedagogy course found the most valuable aspects of the teaching philosophy statement workshop to be the “worksheets to help jumpstart writing” and “discussion of practical ways to approach writing the teaching philosophy.” Similarly, another graduate student explained that these examples, guides, and discussion helped her organize her teaching: “Now the philosophy is much more thematically cohesive than initially, and I think it is clear from the philosophy what I care about in the classroom. I don’t think I had that strength in my original versions.”

Providing feedback. Even after writers have put their ideas into sentences and paragraphs, a mentored writing process can support all aspects of revision: content, organization, style, and editing. On our campus, peers and faculty mentors, especially those associated with discipline-based pedagogy courses, provide guidance within the discipline. Outside the discipline, graduate students and postdoctoral fellows can receive feedback from instructional consultants and trained graduate writing tutors from the writing program on our campus, which provides repeated one-on-one consultations. These tutors are enrolled in graduate programs throughout campus and have been trained to provide tutoring on general writing as well as tutoring on how to write a teaching statement. Our teaching support center also facilitates interdisciplinary writing groups as an opportunity for peer evaluation and support. Composed of no more than six graduate students, each group usually meets every other week, three to four times in total. Many graduate students take advantage of both the writing groups as well as multiple individualized feedback sessions with consultants or tutors while composing and revising their teaching statements.

Whether in one-on-one settings or in groups, our feedback to writers emphasizes the qualities of effective statements as described by search committees, including evidence of practice, student centeredness, enthusiasm for teaching, thoughtful reflection, and clear writing (8, 19). Therefore, when providing feedback on a first draft, we follow a similar process to the one modeled in our workshops. We offer encouragement on the questions about the writer’s teaching that were answered well, and we identify two or three questions from the essential list of questions (Table 2) that the writer might address in a revision.

Table 4. Summary of teaching philosophy statement writing exercises from the Center for Teaching Excellence of Duquesne University

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exercise Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching philosophy writing matrix</td>
<td>Consider your beliefs, practices, and future goals in relation to several aspects of teaching: who the learners are, the student-student and student-teacher relationships, the knowledge and skills needed in the field, the methods to impart the knowledge and skills, and the evidence that students are learning. [From Ref. 24.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical moments exercise</td>
<td>Describe three to four critical moments in your courses (e.g., the first day of class, the first “stupid” question, the first exam, and/or the first time the class understands a complex problem), reflecting on how you prepared students for that moment, how you responded to the students during that critical moment, and how you might respond differently when the situation arises again. [From Ref. 12a.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The four-paragraph model</td>
<td>In four separate paragraphs, describe the following [from Campus Instructional Consulting, Indiana University]: 1. Why do you teach? Where do you get your passion for teaching? 2. What techniques or practices do you use in the classroom to encourage student learning? Name one or two key assignments that you give your students that you think make the biggest impact on their learning. 3. How do you know your students are getting it? What evidence of learning might you present to a search committee? 4. What aspects of your teaching are you working on now? What current learning problems are your students encountering, and how are you trying to ease those difficulties?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How We Teach

MENTORING TEACHING STATEMENT DEVELOPMENT

Table 4. Summary of teaching philosophy statement writing exercises from the Center for Teaching Excellence of Duquesne University

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exercise Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching philosophy writing matrix</td>
<td>Consider your beliefs, practices, and future goals in relation to several aspects of teaching: who the learners are, the student-student and student-teacher relationships, the knowledge and skills needed in the field, the methods to impart the knowledge and skills, and the evidence that students are learning. [From Ref. 24.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical moments exercise</td>
<td>Describe three to four critical moments in your courses (e.g., the first day of class, the first “stupid” question, the first exam, and/or the first time the class understands a complex problem), reflecting on how you prepared students for that moment, how you responded to the students during that critical moment, and how you might respond differently when the situation arises again. [From Ref. 12a.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The four-paragraph model</td>
<td>In four separate paragraphs, describe the following [from Campus Instructional Consulting, Indiana University]: 1. Why do you teach? Where do you get your passion for teaching? 2. What techniques or practices do you use in the classroom to encourage student learning? Name one or two key assignments that you give your students that you think make the biggest impact on their learning. 3. How do you know your students are getting it? What evidence of learning might you present to a search committee? 4. What aspects of your teaching are you working on now? What current learning problems are your students encountering, and how are you trying to ease those difficulties?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The teaching cube

Describe the following six facets of your teaching [adapted by Gail Goodyear, Center for Effective Teaching and Learning, University of Texas: http://www.ute.p/etal/porfoli/cube.htm]:

• Learn (What motivates you to learn in this discipline? Why have you chosen your discipline?)
• Act (What happens when you teach? What do you do?)
• Difference (Why does what you do in your teaching make a difference in the lives of others? Why is it relevant?)
• Values (What values do you impart to your students and why?)
• Setting (Why do you develop the learning environment(s) and relationship(s) with students that you do?)
• Enjoy (What are your favorite statements to make about teaching? Why are they your favorites?)

Self-reflection interview exercise

In a creative writing exercise, imagine that you are being interviewed for a magazine article about effective teachers. The following are examples of questions you might address: What is a “personal best” achievement for you as a teacher during the past year? How does your teaching reflect the best teacher you have ever known? What of your worst qualities as a teacher would you throw away? If you wrote a book about teaching, what would the title be? What three points about instruction would you make? [From Ref. 12a.]
As we discuss the responses to these questions with the writer, we encourage him/her to jot down notes or we take notes that the writer can later incorporate into his/her teaching philosophy statement. Below, we enumerate some of the writing issues our clients commonly face and our mentoring processes for addressing them.

**EVIDENCE OF PRACTICE.** Many early drafts of teaching philosophy statements lack concrete evidence of student learning and assessments of teaching (17). In this case, we ask the writer to tell us about and show us classroom artifacts and evidence that they would include in a teaching portfolio. We use this discussion about evidence of practice as an opportunity to demonstrate connectedness between the teaching philosophy statement and the teaching portfolio. Specifically, we engage the writer in a dialogue in which s/he describes how each phase of the teaching and learning process is exemplified in the artifacts, that is, 1) learning goals (what do you want students to know, be able to do, and/or appreciate?); 2) teaching methods (what appropriate teaching methods do you use?); 3) learning assessments (what evidence do you have that students achieved the learning goals?); and 4) teaching assessments (how did/will you revise your teaching given the outcome?). With respect to learning assessments, we encourage writers to describe unique or exemplary student projects, presentations, or papers that demonstrate accomplishment of a learning goal. Alternatively, a graduate student or postdoctoral fellow might write about a student who struggled in the beginning of the course but who later succeeded with the guidance and feedback of the instructor. With respect to teaching assessments, we ask questions such as the following: “How have students acknowledged that you are successful in course design and implementation?” “What personal qualities do you bring to the classroom which students value?” “What new teaching approaches would you like to explore?” and “How might these new approaches be appropriate for your learning goals?” We encourage writers to reflect on their end-of-semester student evaluations and even incorporate one or two well-chosen and articulate quotes from qualitative course evaluations.

**BREADTH AND DEPTH OF THE TEACHING EXPERIENCE.** To help graduate students and postdoctoral fellows persuasively demonstrate their depth and breadth of teaching experience, we encourage them to incorporate examples of teaching methods from different kinds of courses (e.g., introductory/upper-level and survey/topic courses), different kinds of students (e.g., major/nonmajor enrollment), and different kinds of methodologies (e.g., lecture, discussion, field/studio/laboratory, online, and service learning). Examples of teaching practice that cite course names and numbers can make it easier for readers to cross-reference application documents such as the curriculum vitae, syllabi, and letters of reference. Some graduate students and postdoctoral fellows have limited teaching experience, particularly those in the sciences, who often have not developed their own courses and who often have taught only in a laboratory instruction format. Therefore, we encourage writers to think broadly when defining and describing their teaching experience. Tutoring, mentoring undergraduate laboratory research, and community contributions as a museum docent are usually compelling additions to a teaching philosophy statement, especially for academic institutions with a primary emphasis on teaching.

**BALANCING PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE.** Many early drafts of teaching philosophy statements do not go deep enough into both the philosophy (values and general approaches to teaching) and methodology (examples of teaching moments), appearing as though they could have been written by any person in any discipline. For example, many first drafts include general statements about learning goals (e.g., “critical thinking” and “problem-solving skills”) as well as teaching practice (e.g., “active learning” and “small-group discussions”). These vague terms can be problematic for members of a multidisciplinary search committee who define “critical thinking” differently, who want to envision what it is like to be in this person’s class, or who want goals to be measurable and aligned with their teaching methods. To help writers revise teaching philosophy statements that rely heavily on pedagogical jargon, we persuade them to explain “critical thinking” and “active learning” by incorporating descriptions of what it looks like when students and instructors are engaging in these processes in their disciplines. We also invite writers to explain the relevance of these skills for other courses and for students’ personal and professional lives. Once writers have examined how they would measure or prove that a student was able to think critically or solve problems, their resulting statements, which incorporate assessable learning goals and outcomes, are generally clearer and more interesting to read. Careful consideration of vague terms not only motivates writers to remove jargon and buzzwords but also helps them balance philosophy and methodology in their teaching philosophy statements.

**VALUING TEACHING AND LEARNING.** Some writers of teaching philosophy statements put emphasis predominantly on their own teaching goals and objectives (e.g., “I want to create a safe learning environment”) rather than on the students’ learning. These teaching philosophy statements are often characterized by bland statements (e.g., “Excellent teachers use . . .”) or “Students completed a paper on . . .”) and empty phrases (e.g., “I am passionate about students’ learning”). To help writers express their enthusiasm for both their discipline and sharing it with others, we ask them about their own pathway as learners and subsequently teachers: “What got you into the discipline?” “What do you like about what you study?” “What do you hope your undergraduates will like or appreciate about your discipline?” We encourage writers to place themselves (“I” and “me”) and/or their students (“my students”) in most sentences. In addition, we engage writers in a dialogue based on the “great moments” format (Table 3) to help them incorporate more detailed examples of teaching practice into their statements as well as clarify their learning goals for students. Specifically, we encourage writers to replace declarative statements about their enthusiasm for teaching with colorful descriptions of moments in the classroom that speak for their learning goals and personal qualities. We ask writers to tell us about what made that moment great: “What were you doing as the instructor?” “What were the students doing?” “How could you prove to others that this was a great teaching and learning moment?” Reminding writers of the adage “a picture is worth a thousand words” can result in a more heartfelt statement that vividly and honestly displays passion for teaching and learning. Furthermore, by incorporating these moments, writers respond directly to the request for specific examples that search committees say make for successful teaching philosophy statements (8, 19).

---

**How We Teach**

MENTORING TEACHING STATEMENT DEVELOPMENT

---

**Advances in Physiology Education • VOL 35 • JUNE 2011**
The positive effects of a dynamic and collaborative writing process involving workshops, resources and guides, and peer and mentor feedback can be seen in successive drafts of graduate students’ teaching philosophy statements. For example, Kearns et al. (17) investigated the changes over a semester in teaching philosophy statements written by graduate students in a Health Sciences Pedagogy course. Through workshop instruction as well as peer and instructor feedback, the graduate students improved in their ability to explicitly describe their learning goals, their teaching methods, and learning outcomes for their students. Furthermore, the writers were better able to explain the rationale behind their teaching methods and learning assessments. Finally, their writing styles became more reader centered (17). Rubrics for self- and peer evaluation of teaching philosophy statements may be useful in this feedback process involving workshops, resources and guides, and peer and mentor feedback can be seen in successive drafts of graduate students’ teaching philosophy statements. For example, Kearns et al. (17) investigated the changes over a semester in teaching philosophy statements written by graduate students in a Health Sciences Pedagogy course. Through workshop instruction as well as peer and instructor feedback, the graduate students improved in their ability to explicitly describe their learning goals, their teaching methods, and learning outcomes for their students. Furthermore, the writers were better able to explain the rationale behind their teaching methods and learning assessments. Finally, their writing styles became more reader centered (17). Rubrics for self- and peer evaluation of teaching philosophy statements may be useful in this feedback loop (16, 22, 24). Kaplan et al. (16) found that statements that were developed using feedback from a rubric received significantly higher ratings overall and had specific improvements in “evidence of practice” compared with statements written before the rubric was developed. Thus, collaborative writing processes can improve the qualities of a teaching philosophy statement that search committees are looking for in job candidates (8, 19).

The two teaching philosophy statement excerpts below, written by a graduate student as part of an assignment in the Health Sciences Pedagogy course, demonstrate how the writer’s teaching philosophy statement changed through the mentored writing and feedback process. The first excerpt is from the student’s draft statement, and the second excerpt is from the student’s final statement completed ~6 wk later.

The following is the excerpt from the draft teaching philosophy statement:

“I give my students frequent quizzes. I find that if I give them a simple five-min quiz, it will usually give me a good idea of what points are being understood and what needs to be gone over again. Also, I can often tell if the students comprehend by what kinds of questions they are asking.”

The following is the excerpt from the final teaching philosophy statement:

“Critical to the teaching process in both of these cases is having an accurate assessment of how much of the material they understand. To gauge their abilities, I often use quizzes as a formative assessment. These quizzes are five points and usually have five questions. One question is a basic memorization question to see if the students have read the required background material. One question usually requires higher order thinking skills; for instance, how would they design a quick experiment to answer a given question? The other three points are usually of moderate difficulty (overall questions over mechanisms, multiple choice concept questions, etc.). We go over these quizzes as a class immediately after they are turned in and based on the types of questions asked and how many students seemed pleased or displeased with their performance I can judge how well they have understood the material and how to most effectively move forward with the class as a whole.”

Graduate student, Biology

By participating in a workshop as well as multiple feedback sessions with peers, faculty mentors, and professional staff, this graduate student was better able to explain the relationship between her learning goals and her learning assessments, describe the learning assessment in more detail, and indicate how the outcome of her learning assessments transforms her teaching methods.

The graduate students in the Health Sciences Pedagogy course acknowledge that a collaborative and dynamic mentored writing process helps them write an honest, reader-centered teaching philosophy statement and promotes more reflective teaching practice.

“It think I probably would have just waited until applying for jobs [to write the teaching statement]. Then I would have written a really [poor] one and sent it off and not even thought about whether it was good or reflected me. I just don’t think I would have invested the time that I did, or have been as honest as I was.”

Graduate student, Medical Sciences

“I looked at the sum total of [my] teaching . . . and I’d never done that before. And [the teaching statement] is really nice to have to present when I’m on the job market, but I think it was even more instructional . . . I came out of it with a much better sense of what my own personal weaknesses were and that allows me to focus on improving them a lot more than I had in any of my previous teaching experiences.”

Graduate student, Anthropology

“It . . . became more prevalent in my teaching to have a sense of why I was doing [things], that I felt like I’m not just doing it because that was my assistantship, but because I had a reason, that I actually enjoyed it and wanted to be a good teacher. That was something that I didn’t even know, [and] that I probably wouldn’t have even known had I not written [the teaching statement].”

Graduate student, Kinesiology

“Talking with you and having to put down in words my ‘philosophy’ on teaching made me reflect on what I do as a teacher and why I do those particular things. I’d never put that much thought into it before. Now I am conscious of what I really want students to get out of my classes beyond simply conveying baseline facts. In the future I will be more thoughtful about creating assignments and choosing the material to cover based on not only the general knowledge I need to convey but also the higher level learning skills I want my students to develop.”

Graduate student, Biology

Summary

A systematic process for the development of a teaching philosophy statement integrates multiple sources of support, informs graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and junior faculty members of the document’s purpose and audience, reduces writing anxiety, helps graduate students produce thoughtful, engaging, and honest statements, and encourages meaningful reflection on teaching and learning. As instructional consultants in a campus teaching support center, we have found the following assemblage of local resources useful in accomplishing these goals:

- Experienced faculty members and professional staff who are informed of the current theory and research about teaching philosophy statements, who have read many statements produced locally and at other institutions, who recognize common writing problems in teaching statements, who have tools for providing specific feedback,
and who are available to their trainees for multiple feedback opportunities.

- Print and web-based writing guides that describe the purpose of a teaching philosophy statement, that provide examples and activities to foster writing, and that inform the mentoring practice of faculty members and professional staff.
- Campus-wide and department-based workshops that introduce the purpose, audience, content, and style of successful teaching philosophy statements through discussion among graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, junior faculty members, and their mentors.
- Sample statements and teaching portfolios that reduce anxiety about writing the teaching philosophy statement by modeling the content, formats, and styles of successful teaching philosophy statements and that provide trainees with peer mentoring opportunities through share fairs.
- Writing groups organized by faculty mentors, instructional consultants, or the graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, or junior faculty members themselves that provide peer support networks and that reinforce principles of effective teaching statements by allowing trainees opportunities to give feedback on teaching philosophy statements.
- Tutorials offered by the institution’s teaching center and/or writing center that offer trainees another venue for receiving repeated feedback on teaching philosophy statements, especially if discipline-based support is lacking.

Faculty mentors and professional staff who build a comprehensive guide for supporting the effective development of teaching philosophy statements become valuable resources for graduate students and postdoctoral fellows entering the academic job market. An informed writing process has benefits for the writer beyond creating a successful statement for job applications. These local and global resources for faculty members, professional staff, graduate students, and postdoctoral fellows can stimulate and enrich discussions about the value of teaching philosophy statements as well as definitions of effective teaching. And faculty mentors and professional staff who assist with writing teaching philosophy statements reap satisfying and rewarding benefits when their trainees’ writing about teaching improves, when their trainees effectively innovate in their teaching, and when their trainees acquire the academic jobs of their choice.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors are grateful to the participants of our workshops, working groups, and consultations who provided us with feedback on the strategies that helped them to prepare effective teaching philosophy statements. The authors thank Prof. V. D. O’Loughlin and Prof. M. Braun, whose investigation of the influence of a health sciences pedagogy course on graduate students’ scholarly progression as teacher-scholars provided additional information about the effectiveness of our consulting strategies. The authors are also grateful to the students in the spring 2007 Health Sciences Pedagogy course for allowing us to learn so much from them. Finally, the authors thank L. Plummer and J. A. Vogt (both of the Campus Writing Program) who collaborated with us in providing writing assistance to graduate students, who have helped us expand our consulting strategies, and who provided valuable feedback on this manuscript.

DISCLOSURES

No conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, are declared by the author(s).

REFERENCES


