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

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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.

pedagogy course; mentoring; teaching assistant

FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS, postdoctoral fellows, and junior faculty members who are preparing for the professional expectations of academic life, faculty mentors serve as a primary resource by modeling their responsibilities in teaching, research, and service. In particular, faculty advisors can help their trainees articulate their instructional approaches in a statement of teaching philosophy and tailor this statement to the culture and language of the discipline. This guidance is especially valuable as statements of teaching philosophy become increasingly common requirements for academic job applications (8, 19, 25). Because faculty mentors have served on hiring committees, they can help their trainees address both the abstract and concrete elements of teaching valued by hiring committees. Nevertheless, because graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and junior faculty members often receive little assistance on how to think about or write about teaching from their faculty mentors (1, 23), they may need to seek additional advice from departmental teaching coordinators or consultants in a centralized teaching or writing center.

Formalized guidance for faculty mentors and instructional consultants about writing a statement of teaching philosophy is scarce since most resources are targeted to graduate students preparing academic job applications and to faculty members preparing tenure dossiers (6, 26). Thus, faculty mentors and consultants may rely on intuitive approaches to help their trainees prepare their application materials. Yet graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and junior faculty members need systematic and ongoing support from mentors to supplement the limited effectiveness of “how-to” written resources and to navigate high-stakes academic job searches. Mentoring the preparation and articulation of a teaching philosophy requires both disciplinary knowledge of the academic job search and methods to help graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and junior faculty members become reflective teacher-scholars.

As instructional consultants in a campus teaching support center, we respond to these concerns with this synthesis for faculty mentors, instructional consultants, graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and junior faculty members about statements of teaching philosophy. This article provides practical information and strategies on how to mentor trainees effectively as they develop and convey a philosophy of teaching. Specifically, we describe the purposes and content of a statement of teaching philosophy and enhance mentors’ access to theory, research, and resources. In addition, we summarize empirical research about the use of these statements in academic job searches to improve their reception by hiring committees. Finally, we describe systematic mentoring practices incorporated into a Health Sciences Pedagogy course that have encouraged dialogue and critical reflection about teaching and learning among graduate students and faculty members. This summary provides resources and practices that allow faculty mentors and instructional consultants to take an active and knowledgeable role in teaching mentorship.

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
document intended to capture the scholarship of teaching” (3). Ideally, graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and faculty members compose this dynamic document early in their teaching careers and revisit and revise it as they acquire experience, hone their philosophy, and adjust their practices. Realistically, many individuals with research-based training must articulate a teaching philosophy based on little instructional experience. Thus, the availability of high-quality resources and mentors ensures that these individuals receive appropriate career preparation.

By using a teaching philosophy to clarify and guide practice, instructors can prepare their classes more effectively and efficiently, devote more classroom time to developing students’ higher-order thinking skills rather than to lecturing on facts and principles, and use their student evaluations as opportunities for thoughtful reflection on the interaction between teaching and learning. For graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and faculty members with many competing demands for time and attention, the development of and commitment to a teaching philosophy may lead to more satisfying experiences for the instructor and better learning environments for students earlier in the instructor’s career (5).

Teaching philosophy statements also are used as various types of certification of teaching skills (24). For example, graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and faculty members with teaching experience may compose teaching statements for application to teaching-based awards or fellowships, for the requirements for a teaching certificate program, for academic job applications, or for promotion and tenure. Committees then use the teaching statement, supported by a portfolio of student evaluations, observation letters, and evidence of previous teaching experience, to assess each candidate’s potential for teaching success, commitment to and enthusiasm for teaching, writing and communication skills, reflective teaching practice, student centeredness, and match to the institution’s teaching mission (4, 8, 16, 19, 27).

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 students1 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 thinking 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

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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.
Table 1. Selected websites about writing teaching philosophy statements from university instructional support centers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Duquesne University, Center for Teaching Excellence</td>
<td><a href="http://www.duq.edu/cte/academic-careers/teaching-philosophy.cfm">http://www.duq.edu/cte/academic-careers/teaching-philosophy.cfm</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ohio State University, Faculty and TA Development</td>
<td><a href="http://ucat.osu.edu/teaching_portfolio/philosophy/philosophy2.html">http://ucat.osu.edu/teaching_portfolio/philosophy/philosophy2.html</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Hawaii, Second Language Teaching and Curriculum Center</td>
<td><a href="http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/tipps/">http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/tipps/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Colorado, Graduate Teacher Program</td>
<td><a href="http://www.colorado.edu/gtp/professional/portfolios/index.htm">http://www.colorado.edu/gtp/professional/portfolios/index.htm</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Michigan, Center for Research on Learning and Teaching</td>
<td><a href="http://www.crlt.umich.edu/strategies/tstpts.php">http://www.crlt.umich.edu/strategies/tstpts.php</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ohio State University, Faculty and TA Development</td>
<td><a href="http://ucat.osu.edu/teaching_portfolio/philosophy/philosophy2.html">http://ucat.osu.edu/teaching_portfolio/philosophy/philosophy2.html</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Hawaii, Second Language Teaching and Curriculum Center</td>
<td><a href="http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/tipps/">http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/tipps/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Colorado, Graduate Teacher Program</td>
<td><a href="http://www.colorado.edu/gtp/professional/portfolios/index.htm">http://www.colorado.edu/gtp/professional/portfolios/index.htm</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Michigan, Center for Research on Learning and Teaching</td>
<td><a href="http://www.crlt.umich.edu/strategies/tstpts.php">http://www.crlt.umich.edu/strategies/tstpts.php</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanderbilt University, Center for Teaching</td>
<td><a href="http://www.vanderbilt.edu/cft/resources/teaching_resources/reflecting/philosophy.htm">http://www.vanderbilt.edu/cft/resources/teaching_resources/reflecting/philosophy.htm</a></td>
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Teacher 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” 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
How We Teach

MENTORING TEACHING STATEMENT DEVELOPMENT

rotation at our discipline-based and public workshops. We also have a growing library of teaching portfolios, each containing a teaching statement, available for nonlending perusal at our office. In exchange for a copy of a client’s teaching portfolio, we provide supplies to construct a library copy of the portfolio (e.g., binder, cover sheets, tabs, and printing) and a thank you note to include in the client’s teaching portfolio. Workshop participants generally respond positively to these specific local examples, yet find some qualities lacking, making the process of writing a successful statement seem achievable. Furthermore, we prefer the “local flavor” of these statements over statements downloaded from the internet. Generally, our current writers apply for positions similar to those of the authors of the sample statements and may know the authors personally. Thus, the use of local teaching statements in workshops and in consultations motivates graduate students and postdoctoral fellows to seek writing support from their peers and mentors. We encourage workshop participants to peruse our library of teaching statements and portfolios on their own time.

Discussion among peers and mentors of sample teaching statements is a powerful way to acquaint graduate students and postdoctoral fellows with the genre. One graduate student in the Health Sciences Pedagogy course, responding to the most valuable aspect of the teaching philosophy statement workshop, said: “I liked that we got to discuss what was effective/affective about specific examples.” Another agreed: “I think reading and evaluating the statements was the most useful because it got me thinking about statements more.” Workshop participants also say that the sample statements make abstract concepts about the genre concrete and transferable to their own situations, reduce their writing anxiety, and motivate them to start writing their own teaching statements.

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>
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<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>
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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 students 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 students structure 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.]

The story

Establish a metaphor in the opening paragraph. 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).

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
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 better organize her teaching statement: "Now the philosophy is much more thematically cohesive than initially, and I think it is clear from the teaching statement: "Now the philosophy is much more the-
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 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”).
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. The first excerpt is from the student’s draft philosophy statement completed 6 wk later. 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 seem 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.

“I 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 statement processes by allowing trainees opportunities to give feedback on teaching philosophy statements.
- Tutorials offered by the institution’s teaching center or writing center that offer trainees another venue for receiving feedback opportunities.

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 enlighten 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.

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REFERENCES


