

Writing a Teaching Philosophy Statement



Prepared by Lee Haugen
Center for Teaching Excellence, Iowa State University
March, 1998

Your philosophy of teaching statement should reflect your personal values and the needs of your students and your department. At the least, you will want to address four primary questions, usually in this order:

1. To what end?
2. By what means?
3. To what degree?
4. Why?

The Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Texas at El Paso has very useful information about Teaching Philosophy statements at <http://www.utep.edu/cetal/pub/stofteac.html>

1. To What End?

It is important to start by describing where you want to end. In other words, what are your objectives as a teacher? The rest of your philosophy statement should support these objectives which should be achievable and relevant to your teaching responsibilities; avoid vague or overly grandiose statements. On the other hand, you will want to demonstrate that you strive for more than mediocrity or only nuts-and-bolts transference of facts.

You would certainly want your students to learn the fundamental content of the courses you teach. But beyond that, do you hope to foster critical thinking, facilitate the acquisition of life-long learning skills, prepare students to function effectively in an information economy, or develop problem-solving strategies? What is your role in orienting students to a discipline, to what it means to be an educated person in your field? How do you delineate your areas of responsibility as compared to your students' responsibilities? In what specific ways do you want to improve the education of students in your field? Are there discussions in academic journals or in professional organizations about shortcomings in the education of students today or unmet needs in the discipline and do you have ideas about how to address those shortcomings and needs? If you are going to use teaching in P and T [Privilege and Tenure] bids, you will probably need to connect to national issues or objectives.

These are questions that will require some thought and you will probably benefit from discussing them with other faculty in your department. Some people can sit down and bang out a paragraph or two in a short time but most of us become more thoughtful about the "big" questions when we bounce them off of our colleagues, consider their responses, re-evaluate our positions, revise,

Writing a Teaching Philosophy Statement



talk some more, etc. Your statement of objectives as a teacher is the most important part of your teaching philosophy and you should take some time with it. And if you take it seriously, you will probably come back to this statement to revise or add to it. Think of it as a work in progress.

2. By What Means?

When you have a clear idea about your teaching objectives, you can discuss methods that you use to achieve or work toward those objectives. Here is where you can display your knowledge of learning theory, cognitive development, curriculum design, etc. You will want to explain specific strategies, techniques, exercises, and include both what you have used in the past and are planning for future courses. You will want to tie these directly to your teaching objectives and discuss how each approach is designed for that purpose.

Discuss how you make decisions about content, resources, and methods. If you include a field trip, what are your learning objectives? If you assemble a collection of readings, how did you decide what to include? How do you decide whether to use collaborative or individual projects? Do you use active learning or student-centered learning principles and why? Relate these decisions and methods to the kinds of classes you teach (large lecture, small discussion, lab, etc.) and make connections to your course objectives.

Again, relate your methods to national-level needs for teaching in your discipline whenever possible. If you have developed instructional materials that have been or could be disseminated, be sure to discuss them. If you have designed or are planning innovative activities, describe how they address specific teaching objectives. Have you presented a paper or a workshop at a professional conference related to your teaching methods?

3. To What Degree?

You will need to discuss how you intend to measure your effectiveness vis a vis the objectives and methods you have outlined. Because your objectives are most likely related to student learning, then you will probably use measures of student outcomes to reflect your efforts rather than how many chapters you can cover from the textbook. Student evaluations are always a touchy subject among teachers but in large part that is because teachers have not devised their own assessment methods. Most of us are obligated to use standardized evaluation forms. But that does not prevent us from developing other means that are more directly related to our specific goals and objectives. Teachers who develop their own evaluations usually get more relevant feedback. But in addition, they usually get more positive feedback as well because they are asking the students to reflect on the most important aspects of the course.

If one of your objectives is to develop problem-solving skills, then you will probably want to test your students' ability to solve problems. In that case, discuss how you construct problems for them to solve, what skills those problems are meant to evaluate, and the level of performance

Writing a Teaching Philosophy Statement



that you are seeking. As Ronald Myers, Associate Professor in Veterinary Pathology pointed out in his teaching portfolio: I have come to realize that ultimately students learn what we examine for. If we test for learning of facts, students will learn facts. If we test for problem solving, they will learn to be better problem solvers...My long-term goal is to learn more about and then to implement improved mechanisms for assessment of students, likely in the realm of ability-based or performance-based assessment. There are many resources for improving assessment and student evaluations in the CTE library.

4. Why?

Here is where you can be, if not grandiose, at least a bit grand. What, to you, are the great and wonderful rewards of teaching? Why is teaching important? How do you want to make the world or at least higher education better? When you are overworked and feel undervalued, to what ideals do you return in order to rejuvenate yourself and inspire your students? How do you want to make a difference in the lives of your students?