

Developing a Teaching Philosophy

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Abstract

A common practice for educators is to develop a teaching philosophy which helps them become reflective practitioners throughout time on various teaching and learning strategies. This paper will specifically address: What is a teaching philosophy? What is the purpose? Who is involved? And, what is the process of creating a teaching philosophy? This information will help beginning and more experienced educators as they transform and develop their own personal teaching philosophies over time, a developmental process focused on the enhancement for student learning.

Keywords: Teaching philosophy, reflective practitioner, students, learning, process.

Universities and educational settings often request faculty to develop a teaching philosophy to showcase one's values and beliefs related to teaching and learning. Oftentimes, the faculty member may not truly understand what this entails, thus providing the requestor with a vita of their work in teaching, rather than an actual philosophy paper on personal beliefs and values about teaching and learning. The basics of what a teaching philosophy is, the purpose, who is involved, and the process of creating a teaching philosophy is presented within this paper so that new and experienced educators can develop and transform their teaching and showcase their beliefs and ideologies related to teaching and learning to others.

What is a Teaching Philosophy?

A teaching philosophy is a narrative essay which reflects an individual's beliefs and values about teaching and learning, often including concrete examples of the ways in which that individual enacts those beliefs. It specifically discusses the educator's identity of how he or she educates others. A philosophy derives from reflections on experiences, thus forming specific core beliefs related to teaching and learning (Concordia University, 2012; Walcott, 1966). A philosophy not only helps an individual reflect about his or her teaching, but also helps him or her to stay focused on good days, as well as days that remain challenging and difficult. It is a reminder of an educator's values and beliefs so

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that he or she strives to be consistent in his or her actions in the classrooms and his or her interactions with students.

Developing one's teaching philosophy (or teaching statement) is becoming more common for academic faculty as well as graduate students (CRLT, 2017). Since a philosophy is a work in progress due to changes in teaching practices and professional identities, faculty should expect a philosophy to change throughout their teaching career, as experiences unfold. This may help them develop into more thought-provoking and reflective practitioners which is critical for becoming better educators as it provides a means for comparing actual teaching to beliefs and values. This philosophy often makes their implicit views on teaching and student learning explicit as they showcase what, why, and how they teach. Specific examples of course content, assignments, assessments, teaching strategies and styles are often found in teaching philosophy statements, ideologies, and theories that underlie decision-making and actions.

Since every academic discipline and academic environment has its own cultures, subcultures, expectations and requirements, teaching philosophies may appear uniquely different from one another (Ramini, 2009). A new faculty member's teaching philosophy may also appear different than an experienced faculty member who has had numerous, diverse experiences and/or more professional development opportunities related to teaching and learning. The common ideas though that are typically found in philosophy papers include the what, why, and how of one's teaching, showcasing not only one's beliefs but concrete examples and experiences that expound on those specific ideas.

What is the Purpose?

There can be many purposes for writing a teaching philosophy. For example, an educator may want to explain to students, peers, and/or others his/her teaching beliefs and practices to support how he/she delivers content in the classroom. It may also serve as a professional growth opportunity, as an educator reflects on his/her personal teaching practices with others as a way to mentor peers. As an example, the educator may talk about the ideologies of using various teaching strategies used within the classroom so that peers can read about the educator's philosophy and then observe the educator in action. Further, a teaching philosophy may be needed for promotion and tenure purposes along with teaching award applications so that others can further understand the purpose of the specific teaching strategies and styles utilized by the educator.

Although writing a philosophy may take time, faculty members may also want to truly identify the purpose behind their teaching strategies, styles, and values. It provides an opportunity for faculty to self-reflect and perform with a specific purpose in mind, thus enabling them to become more focused and enthusiastic about one's teaching abilities and values (Concordia University, 2012). During self-reflection, faculty can organize ideas and assure specific examples of classroom practices are emphasized and used to accentuate the values mentioned. This self-reflective process provides opportunities for faculty to continually self-examine their teaching and the learning taking place within and outside of the classroom. As teaching practices unfold, faculty can then assess and evaluate how

their ideas and strategies work, or not work, thus leading to transformational changes in their teaching practices.

Who is Involved?

Although this question may seem trivial, as it is apparent the educator and students would be directly involved, an educator's teaching philosophy may also impact other educators and/or mentees. Innovative ideas and strategies might be presented at professional development trainings and opportunities, thus providing contributions to others about teaching. Supervisors may better understand the purpose and rationale behind the faculty member's teaching strategies, styles, and partiality to using certain tools and materials to aid in one's teaching. This may be relevant not only for existing faculty, but for potential individuals who may be interviewing, hoping to teach within an educational setting. Individuals may also self-assess their practices by examining actions in relation to theory, beliefs, and values.

What is the Process of Creating a Teaching Philosophy?

When developing a teaching philosophy, several steps are involved. First, faculty should generate their own ideas, values, and assumptions about teaching and learning related to their own culture and academic world. This requires researching the institution's mission and vision statements, including upcoming goals related to teaching and learning, and potential courses one may be teaching, as this may influence what an educator needs to know about class sizes and the types of students present within the classroom. It also requires self-examination of one's values, beliefs, where they come from, why they are maintained, the theories one adheres to, a critical exploration of the many influences one has had on his or her experiences over the years (OECD, 2009). An educator may make a list of qualities of an effective educator, imagine oneself as the learner in the classroom, think about concrete details related to one's teaching abilities, and write a letter and/or a memorable experience that occurred in a classroom setting to begin one's first draft (Concordia University, 2012). A faculty member may then ask the following questions such as:

- Why do I teach?
- What do I teach?
- How do I teach?
- How do I measure my own effectiveness?

Educators should also think about who may read this philosophy, keeping in mind that it may be someone outside of the educational realm. Using first person, along with making sure the teaching philosophy is brief and well written, will provide readers with a sense of the author's personal thoughts and beliefs. More specifically, the philosophy should avoid using academic jargon or abstract principles not known to common readers. The paper is usually 1-2 pages in length, uses present tense, includes teaching strategies and methods to help people "see" the classroom environment, and is memorable and unique to one's own teaching experiences (University Center for the Enhancement of Teaching

and Learning, 2017). Avoiding jargon, including core beliefs about educating others, being discipline specific, being honest about one's teaching, and being humble, mentioning students in a non-condescending manner, will also help others identify the true purpose and thought process behind one's teaching (Vanderbilt University-Center for Teaching, 2017).

As individuals progress throughout their teaching career, and reflect on their experiences in relation to values and beliefs, more specific questions may be answered including, but not limited to:

- What goals do I have for myself and for my students?
- How can I facilitate my students learning?
- How can I build relationships with my students?
- Why do I teach the way I do?
- What teaching methods do I rely on? Why?
- How can I create an engaging and enriching environment?
- What constitutes as evidence of student learning?
- How can I create an inclusive environment where everyone feels respected?
- How has my thinking about teaching changed over time?
- What should students expect of me as a teacher (Vanderbilt University-Center for Teaching, 2017)?

A teaching philosophy is not a review of one's vita of what courses have been taught, but rather how the educator teaches and the theories, values, and beliefs behind those strategies. Statements need to be short and concrete, so that others can easily visualize what one's teaching looks like within a typical classroom setting. Educators need to show humility, acknowledging that they don't know everything about teaching and are willing to learn more, thus reflecting on past processes and experiences and adapting to new ones, showcasing a self-reflective, developmental process of one's teaching.

Conclusion

A teaching philosophy is clear statement of an educator's narrative inquiry about how and why he/she educates others. There are many reasons and purposes for writing a teaching philosophy, serving primarily as a professional growth opportunity, as an educator reflects on his/her personal experiences, and how they measure against his or her views, values, and beliefs about what it means to teach and learn. A teaching philosophy sums up one's core values and how one will teach. As a result, it can be used in making decisions about the kind of school one selects to teach in. If a work environment is not in tune with one's teaching philosophy, the individual will possibly burn out or be unhappy due to job dissatisfaction. A philosophy provides direction during the tough times, when one begins to doubt what he or she is doing or why, and it keeps the educator from becoming enslaved by external demands, pressures, and views that may diminish his or her agency or devalue who he or she is as a teacher.

This paper discussed the basics of what a teaching philosophy is, the purpose, who is involved, and the process of creating a teaching philosophy. Faculty should expect a philosophy to change throughout their teaching careers. Some key points to keep in mind though, is that teaching should focus primarily on students learning, therefore, the philosophy should primarily focus on this key characteristic, along with being well written, short and concise, and contain concrete examples. The paper should be grounded in one's discipline and culture, so that it fits well with what the university and program area's overarching teaching and learning goals and mission, yet can be converted or changed to reflect one's developmental process to teaching. As a final thought, getting a 2nd opinion and being open to new teaching and learning strategies and ideas is crucial. Ultimately, this will also aid in the development of one's philosophy, a progressive and ever-changing thought process on how minds are transformed and how teaching evolves over time.

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