How to Write a Statement of Teaching Philosophy

A practical workshop on what a teaching philosophy is and how to get started

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Today we are going to go through a series of activities with the goal of every person leaving this classroom with a starter kit for writing their own teaching philosophy. Does everyone have a packet? Okay, let’s get started.
Before you write, you need to know your audience and define the purpose of a teaching philosophy. Then you need the content: your teaching experience, your teaching style, and what you value in teaching. Once you have the parts, I will show you how to put it together. We will finish with some tips and further resources to consult as you write.
Who asks for a teaching philosophy?

~33% of job ads for faculty

• ~60% will request it during the hiring process
• Others want it but won’t request it
  – “…those who are truly interested in teaching will submit a statement of teaching philosophy without being asked to do so; therefore, we never asked for is specifically.”
• More commonly requested by:
  – BS/MS colleges
  – Candidates in the natural sciences
• Establish your and their commitment to teaching

Meizlish and Kaplan as well as others have done research on what type and what percentage of faculty job ads ask for a teaching philosophy. After looking about 500 ads, they found about 33% ask for a teaching philosophy to be part of the initial application package. Around another 30% to bring it to 60% total will ask for a teaching philosophy at some point during the hiring process. More importantly, there are other employers that won’t ask for it even though they expect it as this quote illustrates. In general, teaching philosophies are most often requested by schools who have an emphasis on training at the Bachelors and Masters degree level, which is not surprising as teaching is often a larger emphasis and a larger part of faculty efforts at these institutions. In addition, candidates in the natural sciences are more often asked for a teaching philosophy. This request at first seems a little surprising, but mostly has to do with the fact that the average graduate student or post-doc may not have a lot of teaching experience. A teaching philosophy lets the hiring institution know that you value teaching and have thought about it. The institution asking for the teaching philosophy lets you know what they value teaching.
What does a teaching philosophy contain?

- Offers evidence of practice
- Conveys self-reflection
- Communicates teaching style
- Communicates teaching values
- Sample of effective writing

Now that we know our audience, what do they want to see in the document. Research has also been done on this subject. I adapted this list of goals from research by O’Neal et al. As I mentioned before the written teach philosophy offers evidence of your teaching practice and conveys that not only have you taught but you have thought some about how you have done it and how you would like to do it in the future. It is an opportunity to communicate both your style and your values. Lastly, it is a sample of your hopefully effective writing. Positions in the liberal arts often ask for a separate writing sample on the basis that teachers in those subjects are often teaching writing. While professors in the sciences rarely teach writing, those hiring faculty want to know you have effective written communication skills. We have established our audience and our purpose, let’s think about each content topic individually.
Teaching Experience

We will start with the most concrete part: teaching experience. Having an idea of what teaching experience you have is the first step to writing a teaching philosophy. You may not use every experience as an example but each experience may have shaped you and your thoughts about teaching.
What counts as a teaching experience?

Some examples or teaching experience: teaching a class, being a TA or TF, mentoring a elementary or high school student, teaching Sunday school class, working with the elderly, teaching an art or dance class, instructing or coaching a sport. Use the space on the worksheet to brainstorm some examples of your teaching experience. Be sure to think broadly and not just focus on what is on your resume or CV. Other examples from the class: parenting, community outreach, teaching high school classes, one-on-one lab mentoring, tutoring, and giving guest lectures.
Teaching Style

*Your style is not only what you do, but how you do it.*

Style can be an esoteric concept but it is about the methods we use to achieve our goals in the classroom and why it is we do things the way we do.
What are your likes and dislikes in the classroom?

1. What HAS worked for you as a:
   - Student?
   - Teacher?

2. What has NOT worked for you as a:
   - Student?
   - Teacher?

To start to understand our style we need to know what we like and dislike. On your worksheet start to brainstorm some of your likes and dislikes in the classroom both as a student and as a teacher. In particular, ask yourself the question: "What has and has not worked for me in the past?" Some ideas from the audience: be excited about the material, engage your students, don’t just rehash the book, and use hands on activities.
One of my favorite and least favorite methods in the classroom is lecture. In my first teaching experience as an undergraduate I helped teach lab sections to freshman undergraduates and as many large lab courses do, there was an overflow of material to cover. So we were asked to make sure certain material was covered in lab section. As I considered how I might accomplish this, I figured I would just do 20 minute mini-lectures during lab time. Most all the classes I had taken so far were in the lecture format, so I figured if that method had worked for me I should use the same method to deliver the assigned content. Later, in graduate school, I had some really awful lecturers and I started to think critically about what is the best way to convey information to students. Let’s think about lecturers and lecturing and consider what their goals might be in the classroom and what are the pluses and minuses to using the lecture method. Ideas from the audience: goal is to convey information, should keep it simple but not too simple, make time for questions, contextualize materials, and have a cohesive narrative.
What are your goals in the classroom?

I would like my students to learn or be able to do:

1.

2.

Now, think about what your goals are in the classroom. Start by finishing the sentence: “I would like my students to learn ______ or be able to ________ when they leave the classroom.” For example, “I would like my student to learn to participate in class.” Try to write down at least two examples and then keep them in mind for the next activity.
What are your methods in the classroom?

I learn best or I think my students learn best when:

1.

2.

Next, think about what methods you use in the classroom to achieve your goals. Glance at your goals then finish the sentence, “I learn best when _______ or I think my students learn best when _______.“ For example, “I think my students learn best when I use computers as a tool in the classroom.” Try to write at least two examples. Then, try to match one of your goals from the last activity with one of your methods from this activity. Try different combinations. Can you make any pairs? Examples from the audience: “Goal: bring the real world into the classroom; Method: used real-world examples to contextualize knowledge. Goal: have students actively learning, Method: use hands-on activities”
Teaching Values

As scientists we are told to check our values and feelings at the door in order to focus on the objective facts

Values are the hardest portion of the teaching philosophy to grasp. By definition, they are asking for your philosophy, and whether you are aware of it or not, that is based on your values. As scientists we are asked to put our values aside and be objective. This is not to say we don’t have values, just that we don’t spend a lot of time thinking about them. I am going to ask you to give your logical brain, the frontal lobe, a rest for a few minutes and get in touch with your hippocampus, your feeling and emotions.
To start this process I am going to tell you a story about how I started to figure out my teaching values. As a second year graduate student I became involved with a group that did K-12 student outreach. My assignment was to teach afterschool science enrichment in an economically disadvantaged middle school. With no budget, no support, and no set curriculum, I was being asked to teach physics, chemistry, and biology to middle schoolers. The exciting and slightly horrifying reality was, what I did in the classroom was completely up to me. As I grappled with this dilemma, the first idea that came to mind is I wanted the students to do hands-on activities. More than likely, they had sat in class sitting still all day and could probably enjoy some physical activity. The other idea that came to me is I wanted these activities to involve discovery. In labs as graduate students and post-docs we discover things, whereas middle school students sometimes glue cotton balls on paper to make clouds and it’s called science. I was not aware of it at the time, but it was pointed out to me later that this immediate emotional response was an expression of my values. First, I understood that students learn the most when they are doing something (hands-on) and I valued the students time and wanted to make sure they got something out of what I was doing (that it wasn’t just busy work). Second, I understood the joy of discovery and I valued the student’s enjoyment. As a activity to get us all thinking about values…
How do you describe yourself as a teacher?

My role in the classroom could best be described as:

1. 

2. 

3. 

What does that say about your values?

Let's think about who we are as teachers. Try to complete the sentence: “My role in the classroom could best be described as ______.” For example, do you see yourself as a coach, an entertainer, or a drill sergeant. We all wear multiple hats in the classroom so try to come up with a few nouns or adjectives and write them on your worksheet. Next, look over all the materials you have so written so far and ask yourself the question, “What are my values or what do I value as a teacher?” For example someone who is a coach in the classroom values independent learning, students are doing most of the work while they help referee the learning process. Someone who is an entertainer might value humor in the classroom and being sure that the material presented is not dry. A drill sergeant might value repetition, learning math in particular can benefit from presenting materials in multiple ways. Another example is teaching to students at the academic level where they are (not where you expect them to be). The relevant value there might be compassion or valuing each student as an individual. On your worksheet, next to the nouns or adjectives you used to describe yourself, your goals, or your methods, try to write a value that might be motivating you or that might be illustrated by that example. Understanding your values is the hardest part of this process so take some time to reflect on how you feel and to understand your motivations. Also consider taking time to discuss your thoughts with a friend or mentor.
Construction of a Teaching Philosophy

With the experiences, style and values in front of you on your handout, the next step is to put the parts together.
A + B and sprinkle with C

1. Match experiences from part A with values from part B
2. Use terms and ideas from part C
3. Recurrent themes
4. Pick 3 favorite pairs
5. Outline
6. Write

Constructing your teaching philosophy is as simple as matching your experiences in A on your handout with your values in part B on the handout and then adding in the terms and ideas from your goals and methods in part C. Try various combinations and look for recurrent themes. Pay attention to the recurrent themes because they will help you understand what is important to you and help you develop your narrative. Pick 3 favorite pairs and try to relate them to specific events where you can tell a story. Try to write an outline for each pair and develop a narrative around them. Once your outline is fleshed out, put pen to paper and write a first draft.
Get Feedback

On:
• Writing style
• Grammar & Spelling
• Use of terminology
• Clarity

From:
• Colleagues in lab
• Trusted friend or mentor

Once you have a draft in hand, be sure to get feedback. Make sure you use first person narrative style and don’t have any grammar or spelling mistakes. When you use terminology, always use and example so it is clear you know what your talking about and your reader is not confused or inundated with buzz words. Ask whoever reads your philosophy to tell you what they think you are trying to say. If it is different from what you are trying to say, be sure to make appropriate revisions. People to consider consulting for feedback include colleagues in your lab such as fellow graduate students and post-docs. Also ask a friend or a mentor. If your PI does not do much teaching ask a committee member or favorite professor who does teach to look it over.
Expert Tips & Additional Resources

Now take your teaching philosophy from good the great.
Customize your teaching philosophy

Mission Statements & Job Descriptions
• Keywords
• Core Values

Have multiple versions
• Add/Remove paragraphs
• Address important issues

A teach philosophy is not a one-size-fits-all document. As your move through your career you will need to often update this document for tenure packages or applying to new jobs. The best way to customize it is to look at the mission statement for the institution you are applying to and see what their core values are. If they mention small class size or hands-on learning and that is also important to you, be sure to include it in your document. Also look closely at the job description. When I applied to my current curriculum fellow position at Harvard I know I would mostly be working with graduate students, so there would not be any situations when I would be teaching lab sections. I had a whole section of my teaching philosophy that was about hands-on learning in undergraduate lab sections, but I took out. By removing this one paragraph, it gave me space to address other topics more relevant to this position. Just be sure as you go through the process of adding and removing paragraphs that you edit your transitions and keep the continuity of the narrative.
Secrets to Success

1. Spend time with the literature
2. Use terminology but always explain it
3. Cite references
4. Be humble but confident
5. Teaching is about students
6. Be yourself!

Lastly, as you start to write keep these thoughts in your mind. It is worthwhile spending some time reading the literature. There are many great overview books about teaching that are available, check out amazon. Also look in the Chronicle of Higher Education online magazine, the journal Science has a regular science education portion, and seek out seminars and other educational opportunities. Use the terminology you find but always give an example of what you mean. Also make reference to where your ideas have come from; it does not have to be a formal citation. You never know who might be reading this document. Be confident in what you say, don’t qualify every sentence. But also be humble, you nor your teaching are perfect and no one likes a bragger. Make sure to mention students in your philosophy. Teaching is about the students and their learning, so make sure that is clear. This is YOUR teaching philosophy so be inspired by others but be sure to be yourself! Consult your packet for a check list of items to go over with your teaching philosophy and also a list of things you might consider including. A list of my sources, which you might also want to consult, are in the packet as well.
A teaching philosophy is not a summary of your CV, nor is it an article on pedagogy. It is an expression of your experiences, your values, and your pedagogical methods.

Questions?

Here is a few sentences to inspire you and to keep in mind as you write.