

You Need a Teaching Philosophy – So Write One!

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Why Write a Teaching Philosophy?

If you are an active instructor, you should have a teaching philosophy. This document is a sort of “mission statement” that articulates what is most important to you as an instructor. With a teaching philosophy in hand, you can evaluate every opportunity – or challenge – in light of your goals and what you believe in.

You may need to write a teaching philosophy if you are looking for a job, applying for an award, or trying for a promotion. Along with sample syllabi, exams, student evaluations, and student work, a teaching philosophy rounds out a complete teaching portfolio. Perhaps most importantly, writing a teaching philosophy forces you to focus on *why* you teach how you teach – preferably something more compelling than “This is how I’ve always done it!”

Four Steps to Building Your Teaching Philosophy

There is no right or wrong way to write a teaching philosophy, except that it should articulate your thoughts in a style that fits your personality. Also, out of consideration to your audience (if you are writing it for anyone but yourself), it probably should not exceed one or two pages.

One simple way to write a teaching philosophy is to consider it in four parts. The first part can consist of some lofty language expressing what you believe about teaching and/or learning. Unfortunately, far too many teaching philosophies consist *only* of this component. A purely theoretical teaching philosophy, while easy to write, is bland and reveals little about what you actually do. A personal, specific teaching philosophy is far more informative and infinitely more interesting.

The next component to consider is what you want your students to be able to do as a result of having taken your class. Do you want them to ask meaningful questions about your subject? Understand the primary literature? Recite all the substrates and enzymes of the Krebs cycle? Master the basic vocabulary of your field? Your list of goals depends on the courses you teach, the needs of your department, and your personality as an instructor.

Next, consider what you do that helps students learn what you want them to learn. For many instructors, this is an enlightening moment. If you teach a certain way just because you have always taught that way, you may be surprised to find a large gap between what you want your students to learn and what you are doing as a teacher. Remember, students usually learn what you test for. If your teaching philosophy says you value problem solving, but your exams test only for memorization, you may want to re-think your teaching approach.

A good way to work on this step is to list everything you do in your class – lectures, quizzes,

discussions, case studies, lab activities – and evaluate each item in light of your teaching goals. Ideally, everything you do in class should support one or more of the goals you have for your students. If an activity you use does not fit with any of your goals, it may be time to think about replacing it with something that does.

The final component of your teaching philosophy is evaluation. What evidence do you have that your teaching strategies and techniques work – that is, that you are achieving your goals? If you have intangible goals like “fostering critical thinking,” it can be difficult to gather objective evidence that your approach is successful. Nevertheless, you may be able to cite student performance on activities that require critical thinking, for example, or perhaps you can track their performance in more advanced courses that require critical thinking. Unsolicited student comments are sometimes also helpful.

This approach to writing a teaching philosophy forces you to confront what you believe, the goals you have for your students, your own techniques, and the evidence that your approach is successful. You should revisit your teaching philosophy frequently as you develop your craft, revising it as needed to reflect what you have learned yourself.

One last piece of advice: do not plagiarize your teaching philosophy. This may seem painfully obvious, but the Internet is full of sample philosophies, and it may be tempting to borrow from people who have eloquently expressed their ideas. By copying from others, you risk the severe embarrassment of getting caught doing what we adamantly tell our students not to do. You also cheat yourself out of an important opportunity for personal reflection.

Resources

Bain, Ken. 2004. *What the Best College Teachers Do*. Harvard University Press, 224 pages.
Haugen, Lee. 1998. *Writing a Teaching Philosophy Statement*. Center for Teaching Excellence, Iowa State University <http://www.celt.iastate.edu/teaching/philosophy.html>.
Ohio State University Faculty and T.A. Development. 2005. *Writing a Philosophy of Teaching Statement*. <http://ftad.osu.edu/portfolio/philosophy/Philosophy.html> (this site has many examples).

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About the Author

Mariëlle Hoefnagels is an assistant professor at the University of Oklahoma, where she teaches biology courses for nonmajors and majors, both face-to-face and online. She received her PhD in botany and plant pathology from Oregon State University. She is co-author on the textbook *Life*, and she is almost finished writing a new textbook for nonmajors. The idea for this mini-workshop came from her recent experience as chair of a search committee. The majority of applicants’ teaching philosophies were far too general and theoretical, and they revealed nothing about what the applicant actually does as a teacher. As a result, she began researching how to craft a teaching philosophy that is not only interesting to read but also useful to the writer. (And yes, she did come across one that was plagiarized!)

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