

Writing a Statement of Teaching Philosophy for the Academic Job Search

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Domestic Environmental Policy and Politics.

Lehigh University's year-old Environmental Initiative seeks an Assistant Professor for a tenure track position. To apply, please send a cover letter, current curriculum vitae, syllabi and other evidence of teaching style and effectiveness, a statement of teaching philosophy, a sample of scholarship (if available) and three letters of reference.

Assistant Professor (tenure track). Specialization in African and Post Colonial Literatures. Send letter of application, curriculum vitae, statement of teaching philosophy, graduate school transcript, and three letters of recommendation. Northeastern Illinois University is an affirmative action, equal opportunity employer.

LSU's Department of Chemistry (chemistry.lsu.edu) anticipates filling one or two tenure-track positions in the fields of NMR Spectroscopy (Ref: Log #0184) and Physical Chemistry (Ref: Log #0186), broadly defined. Applications should consist of a research proposal, a statement of teaching philosophy, and a curriculum vitae (including address). Applicants should arrange for submission of three letters of recommendation.

Introduction

As these recent job ads illustrate, requests for teaching philosophies are common in the academic market. In fact, a survey of 457 search committee chairs in six disciplines (English, history, political science, psychology, biology, and chemistry) found that 57% requested a teaching statement at some point in a job search (Meizlish & Kaplan, in press). These results differed slightly by institutional type, with master's and bachelor's institutions requesting them more often than doctoral institutions. Results also differed by discipline. Surprisingly, requests for teaching philosophies were most frequent in the natural sciences. But the overall message is clear: job applicants in all fields may be asked to submit a teaching philosophy (see also Bruff, in press; Montell, 2003; Schönwetter, Taylor, & Ellis, 2006).

Teaching philosophies can serve several purposes (e.g., self-reflection, introduction to a teaching portfolio, communication with students), but we focus here on those written for academic job applications. Such statements communicate a job candidate's approach to teaching and learning to a faculty considering whether to make that candidate one of their colleagues. Since a committee cannot possibly observe the teaching of every applicant, the teaching philosophy helps search committee members imagine themselves in each candidate's classroom. What is it like to be one of this instructor's students? Why does she make the pedagogical decisions she does? As a student in this classroom, how would I spend my fifty minutes on a given day? How does the instructor address the challenges and resources of teaching in his particular discipline? Does her teaching style complement our department's philosophy of instruction?

This Occasional Paper is designed to help experienced graduate students write a statement of teaching philosophy. The paper contains four sections. First, we offer suggestions for making a philosophy of teaching explicit and getting it on paper. Second, we discuss research on characteristics of effective statements. Third, we introduce a rubric that can guide the development and crafting of a teaching statement that search committees will value. Finally, we address questions that job candidates often raise about this sometimes perplexing document.

Advice for Getting Started

Just because you have never written a statement of your teaching philosophy does not mean you do not have a philosophy. If you engage a group of learners who are your responsibility, then your behavior in designing their learning environment must follow from your philosophical orientation. What you need to do is discover what [your philosophy] is and then make it explicit. (Coppola, 2000, p. 1)

Beginning the teaching philosophy is often the hardest part of writing one. The motivations behind the decisions we make in the classroom can be surprisingly elusive when we try to put them on paper. Since there is no single approach that will work for all writers, we offer three strategies for getting started:

1. Goodyear and Allchin (1998) found that thinking about the "big" questions of teaching helped instructors articulate their philosophies:

- * What motivates me to learn about this subject?
- * What do I expect to be the outcomes of my teaching?
- * How do I know when I've taught successfully?

2. In workshops and seminars at U-M, we have found that some graduate students prefer to approach a statement by thinking about more concrete and manageable "fragments" of teaching that can then be assembled into a holistic essay. The following questions are designed to get you started:

- * Why do you teach?
- * What do you believe or value about teaching and student learning?
- * If you had to choose a metaphor for teaching/learning, what would it be?
- * How do your research and disciplinary context influence your teaching?
- * How do your identity/background and your students' identities/backgrounds affect teaching and learning in your classes?
- * How do you take into account differences in student learning styles in your teaching?
- * What is your approach to evaluating and assessing students?

3. Finally, some instructors find it most useful to begin by simply looking at examples of others' philosophies. CRLT has posted sample statements from a variety of disciplines at <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/tstrategies/tstpum.html>

When looking at others' philosophies, you will likely note considerable variation, both in terms of content and format, and you will likely find some approaches that resonate with you. While there is no single approach to a teaching philosophy, Figure 1 provides some general guidelines for those statements written for the academic job market.

Figure 1. Some general guidelines for writing the teaching philosophy (adapted from Chism, 1998):

- * Keep it brief (1-2 pages).
 - * Use a narrative, first person approach.
 - * Make it reflective and personal.
 - * Discuss your goals for your students, the methods you use to achieve those goals, and the assessments you use to find out if students have met your expectations.
 - * Explain your specific disciplinary context and use specific examples of your practice.
 - * Showcase your strengths and accomplishments.
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Once you've articulated a first draft, you can begin shaping and polishing it for the search committees who will be reading it. In the following section, we discuss characteristics of successful teaching philosophy statements and provide a rubric for evaluating a teaching statement and aiming it at the right audience.

What Constitutes a Good Statement?

In their survey of search committee chairs, Meizlish and Kaplan (in press) found broad agreement on the desirable characteristics of a statement of teaching philosophy. Specifically, chairs described successful teaching statements as having the following characteristics:

- * They offer evidence of practice. Search committee chairs want to understand how candidates enact their teaching philosophies. In particular, they want to see specific and personal examples and experiences rather than vague references to educational jargon or formulaic statements.
- * They convey reflectiveness. Search committees want to know that a candidate is a thoughtful instructor. They are interested in candidates who can discuss their approach to instructional challenges and their plans for future pedagogical development.
- * They communicate that teaching is valued. Search chairs appreciate a tone or language that conveys a candidate's enthusiasm and commitment to teaching. They are wary of candidates who talk about teaching as a burden or a requirement that is less important than research.
- * They are student- or learning-centered, attuned to differences in student abilities, learning styles, or levels. Search committee chairs want concrete evidence of a candidate's attentiveness to student learning (rather than just content) and awareness of and ability to deal with student differences in the classroom.
- * They are well written, clear, and readable. Search chairs draw conclusions about candidates from all elements of the application packet. Candidates can be undermined by carelessness in their teaching statements.

Note again that the full article can be found at:

http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/CRLT_no23.pdf

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