

## WRITING A STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY FOR THE ACADEMIC JOB SEARCH

*Chris O'Neal, Deborah Meizlish, and Matthew Kaplan*

*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](http://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).

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*Chris O'Neal is Senior Consultant for Institutional Initiatives at the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT). Deborah Meizlish is Coordinator of Social Science Initiatives at CRLT. Matthew Kaplan is Managing Director of CRLT. They have Ph.D.s in Biology, Political Science, and Comparative Literature, respectively.*



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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)*

**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.

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 utilize multiple pedagogical approaches 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.

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, background knowledge, 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.

### A Rubric to Evaluate the Teaching Philosophy

Based on survey responses from search committee chairs, our own experience reading hundreds of teaching philosophies, and research on best practices in teaching and learning, we constructed a rubric to help graduate students write and evaluate statements of teaching philosophy (Figure 2). The rubric can be used as a starting point for revising first drafts of your philosophy. The rubric consists of the following five categories:

1. Goals for student learning
2. Enactment of goals
3. Assessment of goals
4. Creating an inclusive learning environment
5. Structure, rhetoric, and language

The first three categories of the rubric were purposefully framed to encourage instructors to think about the alignment of their goals, methods, and assessments. Research suggests that aligning intended outcomes (goals), instructional methods, and testing can lead to significant gains in student learning. Instructional alignment is more important for tasks involving higher-order thinking skills, and it has a particularly strong impact on the performance of lower aptitude students (Cohen, 1987).

In terms of writing a teaching statement, focusing on alignment raises a number of useful questions about your approach to teaching and student learning: What do you want students to learn (and why)? What approach will you take to help students acquire the desired knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and how can you best test students to determine whether they have reached these goals? Reflecting on these issues in a systematic fashion allows you to develop a clear sense of why you take the approach you do, often one of the most difficult aspects of writing a teaching statement. It also has the potential to reveal areas of misalignment, providing clear direction for future development and ensuring that the teaching statement is not merely a rhetorical exercise, but a useful contribution to your development as a teacher.

The fourth category reflects our belief that pedagogical practices that reach students at the margins of the classroom are beneficial for all students. As Kardia (1998) writes,

Attention to race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and other student characteristics is consistent

with an improved learning environment for all students. For example, an instructor who provides more lead time with assignments in response to the needs of a student with a physical disability will be appreciated by all students, even though the majority of the students might have been able to find ways to compensate for the lack of lead time. (p. 19)

Research has confirmed the benefits of diversity for promoting student learning and development. For example, studies conducted at U-M on the impact of racial diversity on student learning and attitudes confirm that positive classroom interactions across racial difference can lead to increased student motivation, critical thinking skills, and social engagement. Obviously, it is up to faculty to create positive learning experiences in order to take advantage of diversity. "Students, indeed, acquire a very broad range of skills, motivations, values, and cognitive capacities from diverse peers when provided with the appropriate opportunities to do so" (Gurin, 1999, Conclusion). Future faculty need to demonstrate that they have thought carefully about these issues.

The last category addresses some of the most common complaints search committee chairs voiced about teaching statements. Chairs complained about teaching jargon that alienates many readers and weak thematic structures that make reading difficult. Obviously, search committees are more likely to have a positive view of a well-written teaching philosophy than a poorly written one.

A common component running through all of these categories is a focus on specificity, disciplinary context, and rich, illustrative examples. The importance of this component is based on the finding that search committees want to read about specific examples of how candidates enact their teaching philosophies. What does this mean in practice? Rather than saying, "I use active learning in my teaching," write about a *specific* exercise you use in your class that engages students actively. Why do you use it? How were students different after the activity? Thinking about your students, what do they typically find most challenging about that activity? How do you know that the activity worked?

Below we provide excerpts from teaching philosophies written by U-M graduate students that exemplify each of the rubric's first four categories (the fifth, by necessity, is illustrated by each example).

### *Goals for student learning*

At the heart of most teaching philosophies is a set of goals for what an instructor hopes to accomplish in the classroom. An instructor's goals should describe how students will be different after leaving that instructor's class. What will they be capable of doing that they could not before? What will they know that they did not before? How will they see the world differently? Goals in a teaching philosophy should be clearly written to describe the ways students will develop, as well as to convey the context of the instructor's discipline.

In this description of goals, a social work graduate student instructor (GSI) talks about the transformative nature of social work education. Her goals for her students are lifelong and directly tied to the mission of social work as a discipline. Note the specificity of the skills she hopes students will attain.

Social work education should foster students' critical consciousness – the ability "to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against those oppressive elements" (Freire)... Through creative and interactive activities in and outside of my classroom, students learn to recognize, analyze, and work to change dynamics of privilege and oppression when engaging with others in all areas of practice – individual, group, community, or state.

### *Enactment and assessment of goals*

A teaching philosophy cannot rest solely on an instructor's learning goals. For it to be useful in the job search, it must also communicate how instructors will achieve those goals, and how they will know that they have achieved them. Specificity is compelling when talking about teaching methods and assessments. Likewise, the more closely the methods and assessments are grounded in disciplinary pedagogies, the more they will resonate with readers in that field. The first example below describes the teaching methods used by a GSI in Germanic Languages and Literatures. The second describes how an electrical engineering GSI assesses student learning.

While confronting my students with the challenge of learning new languages and cultures, I encourage them to reflect on their own beliefs and try to open their minds to new ways of seeing things. For example, in my

fourth-semester German class that focused on the lives of and work of the Brothers Grimm, we often engaged in discussion of original, European fairy tales, comparing them to their well-known Disney versions. Such comparisons helped my students not only to learn about important aspects of German literature, but also encouraged them to step back and reflect on the values of their own culture.

In order to solve new problems, engineers should be able to think through them. The final solution to a problem is rarely obvious and, as such, the thinking process must be developed and refined with practice. In a term, I assign several individual and group projects that incorporate multiple ideas and first principles. Projects early in a term are broken down with milestones such that students can begin to learn how to approach a multifaceted problem on their own.... In addition to projects, students use their critical thinking skills on a more regular basis during weekly timed quizzes. The quizzes are not designed to test memorization...rather, they are designed to test problem solving, as each quiz cannot be completed if not approached properly.

#### *Creating an inclusive learning environment*

This category emphasizes the integration of inclusive teaching and learning throughout the statement, thereby avoiding the isolated “diversity paragraph.” In the following quotations, the authors connect inclusive teaching to their goals for their courses and their understandings of their disciplines.

Parallel to the idea of discovering new things as an engineer is the idea of discovering new minds and cultures. Similarly, learning analytical and evaluation skills as an engineer parallels learning to understand and/or tolerate other points of view.... In my classes I try to expose the students to different situations to help them gain these skills, including interacting with classmates with different backgrounds (race, ethnicity, gender, technical knowledge...), taking different roles when working in teams (leader, note taker, report writer, etc.), and taking different roles when working individually (presenter or evaluator). By doing so, I hope to provide the students the opportunity to learn not only the theory of mechanical engineering and

problem solving skills, but also to realize that around them there is much to learn as well. (GSI in Mechanical Engineering)

My ideal classroom is primarily a safe and comfortable place where students of diverse background and experience are encouraged to clarify their thoughts and expose their assumptions...for mutual examination.... On whichever level I teach, I intend that my courses are enriching to my students of diverse background in various ways that will suit their particular academic and personal needs. Specifically, through the activities discussed above, I hope that those students of general North American cultural background broaden their intellectual and spiritual horizon by critically reflecting upon their own cultural assumptions and beliefs, and the students of Asian ancestry who are curious about their own philosophical and religious traditions can enrich themselves by learning more about their roots. (GSI in Asian Languages and Culture)

A statement need not achieve a rating of “excellent” in each of the categories described in the rubric to be a good teaching statement. We encourage you to seek input on your teaching statement in much the same way you would solicit feedback on a scholarly paper. Faculty in your department can provide feedback based on their own experience serving on search committees and reading application materials. Keep in mind, however, that the qualities that serve a job candidate well at U-M may not match those at a different institution. For a different perspective, you might ask for feedback from peers in your program who have graduated and are now faculty elsewhere or from mentors at your undergraduate institution.

#### **Frequently Asked Questions**

*1. Do I have to write a new teaching philosophy for every school?*

An individual's core teaching philosophy probably will not change based on the school to which he or she is applying for a position. That said, search committees are attentive to the match or mismatch between the priorities of their institution or department and the priorities implied by a job candidate's teaching statement and other application materials. It is worth considering the range of positions to

which you are applying and thinking carefully about whether some degree of customization (based on institutional type, focus of the position, etc.) is appropriate.

2. *What should I do if I don't have a lot of teaching experience upon which to base my statement of teaching philosophy?*

This is not an uncommon situation, particularly in some disciplines where teaching opportunities for graduates are rare. Regardless of your experience as an instructor, you have years of experience as a student in your discipline that you can draw from. Additionally, you may have some experience mentoring students in the lab, independent study, or elsewhere. Talk about your approach to teaching in these settings and the lessons you would take to your own classroom.

3. *Can sending an unsolicited teaching philosophy hurt me when I'm applying for faculty positions?*

Meizlish and Kaplan asked search committees this very question. The conclusion was clear: submitting an unsolicited teaching statement is viewed positively by most search committee chairs.

4. *Should I reference or include student ratings and comments?*

A teaching statement is a brief overview of your approach to teaching supported by rich examples drawn from your practice. As a result, support materials such as student ratings and comments would be out of place in a teaching statement. Consider instead constructing a teaching portfolio to highlight these materials. Teaching portfolios are organized, annotated collections of the "evidence" that supports your philosophy. They can include student evaluations, samples of assignments, letters of recommendation, samples of student work, etc. Note that teaching portfolios are rarely requested by search committees. For more information, see CRLT Occasional Paper No. 11, *The Teaching Portfolio* (available at <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/resources/occasional>).

5. *Are teaching philosophies original work? Couldn't I adopt someone else's philosophy if I completely agree with what they're saying?*

Teaching philosophies are original work, just like anything else you or someone else writes. Copying others' philosophies is plagiarism. Besides, a well-written philosophy should be rooted in your own practice and illuminated by specific examples from your own work. No one else has had exactly your experiences in the classroom.

6. *Will this be the last time I write a teaching philosophy?*

Teaching philosophies are becoming a common component of tenure and promotion packages at colleges and universities. If you continue in academia as a tenured or untenured faculty member, a teaching statement will likely be one of the ways in which your performance is assessed. Fortunately, having written one for the job search, you will have a head start. Remember, however, that the teaching philosophy is an evolving document, changing as you gain more experience as a teacher and your beliefs about effective teaching and learning evolve. Returning to the teaching philosophy statement throughout your career is a useful reflective exercise that can help to make your current teaching practice more explicit and deliberate.

7. *Where can I learn more about teaching philosophies?*

The CRLT Teaching Strategies website contains a section on teaching statements (<http://www.crlt.umich.edu/tstrategies/tstpts.html>) with useful articles and sample statements from a variety of disciplines. CRLT offers workshops on writing teaching statements at a one-day Preparing Future Faculty Conference each fall. Graduate students interested in a more intensive experience can apply to participate in a month-long Preparing Future Faculty Seminar that is co-sponsored by Rackham and offered every May. (See <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/gsis/pff.html> for more information about these programs.) CRLT's Graduate Teaching Consultants are also available to consult one-on-one about teaching philosophies. You can contact CRLT (764-0505, [crlt@umich.edu](mailto:crlt@umich.edu)) to set up a consultation.

**Figure 2. Rubric for composing and evaluating a statement of teaching philosophy**

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Excellent</b>	<b>Needs Some Revision</b>	<b>Unsatisfactory</b>
<p><b>Goals for student learning:</b> What knowledge, skills, and attitudes are important for student success in your discipline? What are you preparing students for? What are key challenges in the teaching-learning process?</p> <p><b>Enactment of goals (teaching methods):</b> What teaching methods do you use? How do these methods contribute to your goals for students? Why are these methods appropriate for use in your discipline?</p>	<p>Goals are clearly articulated, specific, and go beyond knowledge level, including skills, attitudes, career goals, etc. Goals are sensitive to the context of the instructor's discipline. They are concise, not exhaustive.</p> <p>Enactment of goals is specific and thoughtful. Includes details and rationale for teaching methods. The methods are clearly connected to specific goals and are appropriate for those goals. Specific examples of the methods in use within the disciplinary context are given.</p>	<p>Goals are articulated but may be too broad or not specific to the discipline. Goals focus on basic knowledge, ignoring skills acquisition and affective change.</p> <p>Description of teaching methods not clearly connected to goals, or if connected, not well developed (seems like a list of what is done in the classroom). Methods are described, but generically; no example of the instructor's use of the methods within the discipline is communicated.</p>	<p>Articulation of goals is unfocused, incomplete, or missing.</p> <p>Enactment of goals is not articulated. If there is an attempt at articulating teaching methods, it is basic and unreflective.</p>
<p><b>Assessment of goals (measuring student learning):</b> How do you know your goals for students are being met? What sorts of assessment tools do you use (e.g., tests, papers, portfolios, journals), and why? How do assessments contribute to student learning? How do assessments communicate disciplinary priorities?</p>	<p>Specific examples of assessment tools are clearly described. Assessment tools are aligned with teaching goals and teaching methods. Assessments reinforce the priorities and context of the discipline both in content and type.</p>	<p>Assessments are described, but not connected to goals and teaching methods. Description is too general, with no reference to the motivation behind the assessments. There is no clear connection between the assessments and the priorities of the discipline.</p>	<p>Assessment of goals is not articulated or mentioned only in passing.</p>
<p><b>Creating an inclusive learning environment, addressing one or more of the following questions:</b> How do your own and your students' identities (e.g., race, gender, class), backgrounds, experiences, and levels of privilege affect the classroom? How do you use multiple teaching approaches? How do you integrate diverse perspectives into your teaching?</p>	<p>Portrays a coherent philosophy of inclusive education that is integrated throughout the statement. Makes space for diverse ways of knowing and/or teaching approaches. Discussion of roles is sensitive to historically underrepresented students. Demonstrates awareness of issues of equity within the discipline.</p>	<p>Inclusive teaching is addressed but in a cursory manner or in a way that isolates it from the rest of the philosophy. Author briefly connects identity issues to aspects of his/her teaching.</p>	<p>Issues of inclusion are not addressed or addressed in an awkward manner. There is no connection to teaching practices.</p>
<p><b>Structure, rhetoric and language:</b> How is the reader engaged? Is the language used appropriate to the discipline? How is the statement thematically structured?</p>	<p>The statement has a guiding structure and/or theme that engages the reader and organizes the goals, methods, and assessments articulated in the statement. Jargon is avoided and teaching terms (e.g., critical thinking) are given specific definitions that apply to the instructor's disciplinary context. Grammar and spelling are correct.</p>	<p>The statement has a structure and/or theme that is not connected to the ideas actually discussed in the statement, or, organizing structure is weak and does not resonate within the disciplinary context. The statement contains some jargon.</p>	<p>No overall structure present. Statement is a collection of disconnected statements about teaching. Jargon is used liberally and not supported by specific definitions or examples. Needs much revision.</p>

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The University of Michigan  
1071 Palmer Commons  
100 Washtenaw Avenue  
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2218