

Writing a Reflective Teaching Statement

What is a teaching statement (or philosophy)?

There are three common reactions by graduate students to this question: (1) It's one more thing I have to write and submit for a job; (2) I don't have a teaching philosophy, so I can't say; or (3) It's something too abstract or overwhelming, so I simply can't write one.

Let me respond by suggesting: (1) it's a valuable exercise that helps you think about yourself as a teacher prior to being asked such questions in a job interview; (2) it's an expression of your ideas about good teaching and how people learn that have formed through being a student and teacher (though these beliefs may be implicit until you try to identify them); and (3) it's something that sounds abstract but is actually a summary of reflections about real-life experiences.

A basic definition of a teaching statement is “a brief description of what you believe about teaching and learning based on your own experience, including reflections on how that matters to what you do as a teacher both inside and outside of the classroom.” Each reflective statement will be as unique as a person's life experience and educational journey.

Format, structure & content

Given this definition, think about writing a 1-2 page (single space) “reflective statement” that can serve as a central part of your larger teaching portfolio, or that may stand alongside your cv (without being redundant) when you apply for a faculty position. The structure might include sections on what you believe about teaching and learning, how you arrived at those beliefs, illustrations from the classroom, and what you've learned by reflecting on your teaching. Some authors suggest you focus on answering four main questions:

1. To what end? (describe your teaching objectives)
2. By what means? (identify the teaching methods you use to achieve objectives)
3. To what degree? (how do you measure your success? relation to student success?)
4. Why does it matter? (what are your ideal hopes for how you impact students?)

Where do I begin?

While there is no prescriptive or standard format, some things you might include are:

- Why you enjoy teaching? What drew you to both your field, and to teaching?
- A critical incident (good or bad experience) and what you learned from it
- A key quote about teaching and what it means to you
- Ex. “Students will forget what you said, and they will forget what you do, but they will never forget how you made them feel”
- Ways that you take students (diversity, learning styles) into account
- Ways that you make use of your research in teaching (or include students in research)
- Evidence of your classroom teaching skills, or of how they have improved
- (make sure examples fit overall claims about your teaching philosophy)
- Ex. How would you (or have you) improved a specific assignment after using it?
- How do you gather and/or make use of feedback from students, peers, professors?
- Reflective practices: ways you reflect on your teaching and student learning
- Areas in which you hope to develop as a teacher (use of technology, service-learning...)

Other questions to help you

The following questions may stimulate your thinking and facilitate the writing of your reflective teaching statement. These are not listed in any particular order, and you can begin your essay at whatever point you feel is appropriate for you.

Thoughts about teaching

- Why do I like teaching?
- What roles do I assume in teaching?
- What do I enjoy most?
- Who am I as an instructor?
- What do I do as an instructor?
- How do I do it?
- What kinds of teaching do I do? (e.g., classroom, clinic, lab, mentoring, advising, undergraduate)
- How do I know I'm successful?
- Which of my courses is the most successful? Why?
- What makes course planning and design effective?

Thoughts about students and learning

- Who are my students?
- What is my relationship to my students?
- Does student identity and background matter in how you teach?
- How do students best learn the subject I teach?
- What type of classroom environment fosters the best learning?
- What are the barriers to student learning in my field and how do I try to overcome them?
- What do I expect students to be able to do intellectually?
- How do I motivate students to learn?
- In what ways are students “different” when they have completed a course with me?

Developing as a teacher

- How have my answers to some of these questions (above) changed since I began teaching?
- What are my strengths as a teacher, and in what area(s) do I need to improve?
- What do I normally do to monitor or evaluate my teaching?
- What is one aspect of teaching that was difficult for me, and how have I responded to it?
- What efforts have I made, or do I hope to make, to improve my teaching?

Options for TA experience

- What have you learned about yourself as a teacher in your role as a TA?
- What have you learned as a TA about effective teaching?
- What are the important skills for a good teacher, and how are you trying to develop them?
- What have you learned as a TA about how students learn in your field?
- What were some of the struggles faced by students in learning, and how did you help them?
- If given the opportunity, what type of learning activities did you create for students?
- What have you learned about grading or the evaluation of student learning?
- What mistakes have you made, and how have you learned from them?