

### Teaching Philosophy Statements: A Guide

*Marian Fitzmaurice and Joseph Coughlan*  
*Dublin Institute of Technology*

Marian Fitzmaurice  
marian.fitzmaurice@dit.ie  
Joseph Coughlan  
Joseph.Coughlan@dit.ie

#### Introduction

Teaching philosophy statements can be defined in various ways but, put simply, they are written statements of why teachers do what they do—their beliefs and theories about teaching, about students and about learning, all of which underpin what and how they teach.

Despite the many definitions available in the literature, there is actually a lack of research on how teaching philosophy statements are developed and their effectiveness (Schönwetter et al. 2002). This is perhaps unsurprising, given that contemporary discussions of teaching improvement often focus most strongly on teaching competency and effectiveness. That is, good teaching is sometimes seen as a matter of developing effective teaching methods and the use of discussion, video, role play, debate and technology, among other strategies, is a priority. But good teaching involves much more than the effective deployment of classroom-based teaching strategies. Prosser and Trigwell (1997) argue that the focus should in fact be on lecturers' conceptions of the nature of teaching and learning. Of course, effective teaching strategies are important, but good teaching is shaped by many other things, including a focus on student learning, a teacher's enthusiasm for his or her discipline, recognition of the importance of critical reflection and a commitment to teaching as a scholarly activity, equal in importance to traditional research.

A teacher's individual understanding of and perspective on these aspects of effective teaching can be articulated in a teaching philosophy statement. It is our view that teaching philosophies are central to how practising academics teach. They reflect personal beliefs about teaching and learning, disciplinary cultures and institutional practice. Drafting a statement is an opportunity for reflection on personal values, goals and behaviour, as well as interaction with the literature on learning and teaching in higher education.

The purpose of this chapter is to guide teachers—experienced teachers as well as novices—through the process of writing a teaching philosophy statement. The chapter provides a structure and a list of workable questions that can provoke and encourage this process. Rather than being prescriptive, this chapter is structured so that readers can work through the development of their own teaching philosophies. The first section considers why it is important to have a written teaching philosophy statement. The next section provides an overview of influential models, highlighting their most important components as the basis for a new model designed with the varying needs of contemporary academics in mind. Included throughout are

excerpts from teaching philosophies (our own and those of others) as exemplars to trigger teachers' personal reflection.

### The Importance of Teaching Philosophy Statements

Many academics begin their teaching careers in higher education too worried about content and method to appreciate the importance of having an explicit learning and teaching philosophy. Nevertheless, over time most educators develop personal teaching philosophies. Such philosophies are always shaped in relation to individual learning experiences and teaching practices. To articulate them explicitly requires a process of reflection (Loughran 1996), which can be both interesting and challenging but is also necessary to genuine academic development. This activity demonstrates publicly an academic's commitment to such development.

Teaching philosophy also underpins the relationships academics create with their students—but not always explicitly. For example, the way teachers teach is often shaped by the way they prefer to learn themselves, but there may be discrepancies between their styles and the learning needs of their students (Charkins, O'Toole & Wetzel 1985). By writing explicit teaching philosophies, teachers can understand why they teach the way they do and the goals and beliefs that underpin their practice. This allows them to become fully aware of and to address any discrepancies with their students' learning needs. In this way, written teaching philosophy statements help teachers accommodate students' diverse learning needs.

Teaching philosophy statements are also increasingly important at a time when the work of the academic in higher education is being defined in terms of a set of competencies. In the face of this pressure, we must maintain a concept of higher education teaching that goes beyond classroom competency and emphasises teaching both as a pedagogical and moral activity. Rowland (1998) expresses concerns about academic development that focuses only on adding teaching skills to the academic's repertoire. In his view, teaching that is not accompanied by inquiry, reflection and a passion for subject matter—in other words, teaching that is not underpinned by a philosophy—becomes 'stripped of its critical and moral purpose' (Rowland 1998, p. 2). Grasha (2002) agrees, suggesting that 'without an explicit philosophy of teaching our teaching styles are intellectually hollow' (p. 92). Knowing about teaching methodologies and learning theories is not enough; lecturers must be encouraged to examine their beliefs and attitudes 'so that they can expand, hold up a critical light, and adjust their own ideological lens in ways that make the classroom more inclusive, exploratory, and transformative' (Bartolome 2004, p. 14).

### Drafting a Teaching Philosophy Statement

Although the benefits of teaching philosophy statements are extolled in the literature (Chism 1998; Schönwetter et al. 2002), there is little agreement or guidance on how to write them (Schönwetter et al. 2002). Table 1 shows three of the many available models.

**Table 1: Comparison of Models for Teaching Philosophy Statements**

<b>Chism (1998)</b>	<b>Goodyear and Allchin (1998, quoted in Faculty &amp; TA Development 2005)</b>	<b>Schönwetter et al. (2002)</b>
<b>1. Conceptualisation of learning</b> <b>2. Conceptualisation of teaching</b> <b>3. Goals for students</b> <b>4. Implementation of the philosophy</b> <b>5. Professional growth plan</b>	<b>1. Integration of responsibilities</b> <b>2. Expertise</b> <b>3. Relationships</b> <b>4. Learning environment</b> <b>5. Methods, strategies and innovation</b> <b>6. Outcomes</b>	<b>1. Definition of teaching</b> <b>2. Definition of learning</b> <b>3. View of the learner</b> <b>4. Goals and expectations of the student–teacher relationship</b> <b>5. Discussion of teaching methods and discussion of evaluation</b>

In choosing between these models, individuals should select the framework that best reflects their own thinking and experience. As a guide, we suggest that teaching philosophy statements should be short (about 500 to 800 words), single pieces of work that incorporate the following four sections:

1. conceptualisation of teaching and learning
2. integration of responsibilities
3. relationships
4. teaching and assessment methods.

We recognise that these sections are not mutually exclusive; in fact, overlap between them is often to be encouraged. To illustrate them, we include below extracts from a range of teaching philosophy statements. The extracts are by teachers from different disciplines and with different experiences, not privileging any one voice, and certainly not our own. The extracts were gathered during research conducted with teachers engaged in a postgraduate certificate in learning and teaching in higher education at the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) over a five-year period ending in 2006. The aim of the research was to use teaching philosophy statements to determine and explore the themes that academics themselves identify as important in their own teaching and in good teaching more generally. We hope these examples demonstrate that teaching philosophy statements are highly personal, so their content, structure (and length) is ultimately at the individual teacher’s discretion.

### Section 1: Conceptualisation of Teaching and Learning

In this section, teachers put into words how they feel about teaching generally and, furthermore, what they believe and how they feel about the teaching and learning that occurs in their classrooms. Teachers can begin the process of uncovering their beliefs and feelings about teaching by analysing their teaching approaches using a

tool such as the Grasha-Reichman Teaching Style Inventory . This inventory is a short questionnaire (40 questions) that identifies teaching styles in relation to different student groups. It scores teachers on five teaching roles—expert, formal authority, personal model, facilitator or delegator (see Grasha 2002). An alternative is the Approaches to Teaching Inventory devised by Prosser and Trigwell (1999, pp. 176–179). This has been designed to explore the way that academics go about their teaching in a particular subject or context.

For the purpose of developing a teaching philosophy statement, teachers should view their inventory results as less important than using the questions to become more aware of how they operate in their classrooms. In addition, the inventories can, and should, be filled out for different groups, prompting teachers to consider whether they accommodate the diversity of learners currently entering higher education. Teachers might ask themselves whether their classroom roles and activities change depending on the group being taught. Finally, in completing the inventories and reflecting on their results, teachers should remember that we are all products of our own educational histories. Our own experiences as learners inform our teaching approaches and our understanding of what teaching and learning is. Teachers reflecting on this part of a teaching philosophy statement might like to ask themselves questions such as:

- How do my students learn in my subject?
- How does this differ from the way that I learn? Is this different from my own experience as a learner in this area?
- What approach to teaching will best support their learning? Is this different from what I currently do?
- What do I consider my role in the classroom?

Here are some examples of how teachers have used this section of the teaching philosophy statement to articulate their beliefs about learning and teaching. The examples are drawn from our research on teaching philosophy statements.

*Guiding students away from the familiar and getting them to question the unfamiliar: encouraging independent thinking, critical thinking, and creative problem solving; respecting all inputs, ensuring that all students have a voice and a contributing in the process of learning.*

*One other aspect of my teaching that I would like to acknowledge is the challenge of providing ‘open space’ for learners within a teaching situation described by Palmer (1998)...It takes considerably more preparation and effort for me to make a learning space but I have always found it rewarding.*

*I feel that I am there to help students to think for themselves and to give them the building blocks they will need in order to come to their own opinion.*

*I want to provide an atmosphere where my students can grow in their abilities to think critically, problem solve, synthesise information, and express their ideas both in written and verbal forms.*

These statements tend to conceive of teaching as facilitation; there is also a clear concern with encouraging students to question and develop a critical stance. This may well be appropriate in the current climate. Barnett (2000), for example, argues that the university is operating a period characterised by ‘supercomplexity’ and that teaching in this context requires a corresponding pedagogy: ‘a pedagogical transaction in which the student has the pedagogical space to develop her own voice’ (Barnett 2000, p. 160). That said, we do not wish to endorse a particular approach to teaching but are mindful of the advice of Prosser and Trigwell (1999), who suggest that there is no one or right way to teach.

## Section 2: Integration of Responsibilities

Goodyear and Allchin (1998, quoted in Faculty & TA Development 2005) suggest that a teaching philosophy statement should include commentary on how the teacher’s work reflects the three responsibilities of third-level institutions—teaching, learning and public service. This is because teaching philosophies—implicit or explicit—reflect ‘disciplinary cultures, institutional structures and cultures, and stakeholder expectations as well’ (Schönwetter et al. 2002, p. 83). That is, the institutions in which teachers work will inevitably influence—positively or negatively—how they teach and how they are able to balance teaching with research and service to the community. When reflecting on how they integrate their three major responsibilities, teachers could ask:

- What is the mission of my institution/faculty/department? Am I in agreement with the mission of the organisation or do I feel that it doesn’t reflect my practice as an educator?
- If no mission exists, what do I think it should be?
- What activities of mine (teaching, research, mentoring, tutoring, practitioner) contribute to these missions?

The following example demonstrates how a teaching philosophy statement might comment on the integration of teaching and service:

*I feel that this [organisation’s mission in the wider community] is important and should be an aspect of my teaching. I use not-for-profit and government examples in my teaching as much as possible and also try to get students to think about the influence of their actions as corporate citizens on the different groups of people that comprise society.*

Reflection on context also gives statements a grounding in teachers’ own disciplines and can help establish the nexus between teaching and research, as seen in the example below:

*I have tried to develop materials that will be interesting to the students and help them to develop insights into engineering and connect those to real-life experiences. This enables a more fertile place for innovation.*

Teachers can use the latest trends not only in pedagogy but also in their own disciplines to contribute to the further development of a philosophy of teaching.

### Section 3: Relationships

Goodyear and Allchin (1998, quoted in Faculty & TA Development 2005) suggest that a healthy relationship between learner and teacher is ‘essential to successful teaching’. Therefore, teachers should include some reflection on this issue in their teaching philosophy statements. This relationship will be influenced by several factors, including the teacher’s dual role as teacher and as learner and the life experiences of both teacher and students. Skelton (2005) draws attention to the importance of teachers’ personal qualities, such as commitment, enthusiasm, energy, approachability, the interest they show in students as people, and their ability to relate to and empathise with students, a point further developed by Ramsden (2003). The sharing of learning and life experiences can shape classroom relationships in powerful ways, facilitating not only the growth of shared knowledge but also personal development.

Teachers reflecting on this part of a teaching philosophy statement might like to ask questions such as:

- How do I get to know students?
- How do I help students get to know each other?
- How do I build rapport with my students?
- How do the teaching techniques I use support and enhance the teacher–student relationship?
- How accessible am I to my students?

In the statements we analysed in our research, the relational dimension of teaching emerges as important.

*Teaching requires gaining the trust and respect of the learners and engaging them when interacting with them and also providing a safe, supportive atmosphere for learning.*

*I think the best teachers are those who make an effort to establish a rapport with the group, show a genuine interest in the development of their students and are encouraging, fair and give praise.*

*I try to build a rapport with students as I think it is important to establish a supportive learning environment.*

*I try to build an informal classroom atmosphere where questions are welcomed and interruptions to ask points of information and clarification are common. I also believe that it is important not just to do this inside the classroom but also to do it outside the classroom.*

The ability to connect with students and to connect them with the subject depends not only on methods but on the teacher–student relationship (Palmer 1998). The examples above bear witness to this and to teachers’ commitment to build rapport with students. For the participants in our research, being a good teacher means getting to know students and gaining their trust and respect—good teaching in this sense cannot be reduced to technique. Finally, it is interesting to note the language

used in these examples. The language is tentative and, indeed, it is evident that the teachers themselves are not sure whether they are achieving the aims that they are setting themselves. This highlights an important feature of teaching philosophy statements: they should reflect not only what teachers do and where they come from but also what they hope to do.

#### Section 4: Teaching and Assessment Methods

Schönwetter et al. (2002) suggest that a teaching philosophy statement should include commentary on the teaching methods the teacher uses and also on how they assess student learning. Teachers might also wish to reflect not only on their current methods, but also methods they choose not to use. As we have noted above, it is important for teachers to extend their thinking about learning and teaching beyond methodology. One way to do this is by considering the relationship between their methodology and their conceptualisation of learning and teaching.

Questions to prompt reflection on these issues might include:

- What teaching methods and strategies do I currently use? Why?
- What methods do I not currently use? Why not?
- Do I combine traditional classroom-based teaching methods with educational technology? Why or why not?
- How do my teaching methods support the learning outcomes I intend for my students?
- What is the relationship between these methods and my conceptualisation of teaching?
- What assessment methods do I currently use? Why?
- What assessment methods do I not currently use? Why not?
- How do my assessment methods support the learning outcomes I intend for my students?
- Have I actively developed assessment strategies or have I inherited them from previous teachers in my course?
- How could I improve the teaching and assessment methods I currently use?

Below are some examples of how teachers might respond to such prompts.

*So my philosophy is to use as many different methods of catching a student's interest as possible – I try to be creative in my teaching methods, including the use of discussions, group-work, problem-solving, self-testing questionnaires, demonstrations and audio-visual aids.*

*I firmly believe that assessment should provide some sort of formative experience so I go out of my way to write feedback sheets for every piece of assessment commenting on the good points but also on what could be improved for the next piece of assessment.*

*Teaching is about being creative, clear and challenging with the delivery of the subject matter. Teaching is about identifying the appropriate methodologies and strategies to facilitate and achieve learning and understanding.*

*My interest in student-centred learning has grown through discussions with colleagues and tutors, as well as literature based on examples. I believe that focusing on the different ways that a student is learning strengthens my abilities as a teacher and helps me to understand my role in the classroom better.*

Readers will note that, in these examples, teachers perceive themselves as having a responsibility to create effective learning environments and they seek to achieve this through the use of appropriate methodologies. These teachers believe that developing good materials, designing for learning, and sensitively facilitating student engagement are crucial teaching tasks (Knight 2002). Effective learning is stimulated in an environment where students work on tasks or learning activities that promote understanding, rather than activities that encourage learners only to seek or receive information.

## Conclusion

The four sections suggested above are likely to provide a useful and flexible template for most academics. As teachers work on their teaching philosophy statements, they should remember that one of the most important aspects of such statements is critical reflection. A critically reflective approach to practice should help teachers develop greater self-awareness and understanding of learning and teaching issues as they are lived. We found many examples of developing critical awareness, engagement with the literature, and thoughtful attempts to improve the quality of the student learning experience, some examples are which are included below.

*I recognise the importance of taking time to reflect on what I am doing and the value of discussing ideas with colleagues within the college and beyond it. For this reason, I am attempting to keep a journal for reflection.*

*I want to look at my efforts in order to improve my teaching as deep down I always knew there was something I could improve on—not that I was a bad teacher; rather I knew I was capable of being a better teacher.*

*The process of producing this element of my portfolio is of great personal importance. Being able to reflect on my own beliefs and find connections with current educational theory has helped me to become more aware of what I believe my own purpose is within the teaching and learning paradigm and what I am aspiring to do within my practice.*

These academic voices speak powerfully to a practice that is responsible and caring. Our research shows evidence of lecturers developing not only the professional skills and competencies of teaching, but also explaining and justifying what they do, and giving instances of their coming-to-know. In the examples, a view of professionalism emerges that acknowledges the complex and difficult nature of teaching in higher education and the importance of values, professional morality and a determination to improve practice through reflection. These examples support the call for professional academic development to provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on their teaching philosophy, with the aim of fostering a conception of professionalism that goes beyond competencies to emphasise responsibility and care.

## References

- Barnett, R. 2000, 'Supercomplexity and the curriculum', *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 25, no. 3, pp. 255–265.
- Bartolome, L.I. 2004, 'Critical pedagogy and teacher education: Radicalizing prospective teachers', *Teacher Education Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 97–122. Available from: <[http://www.teqjournal.org/backvols/2004/31\\_1/bartolome.pmd.pdf](http://www.teqjournal.org/backvols/2004/31_1/bartolome.pmd.pdf)> [27 March 2007].
- Charkins, R.J., O'Toole, D. & Wetzell, J.N. 1985, 'Linking teacher and student learning styles with student achievement and attitudes', *Journal of Economic Education*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 111–120.
- Chism, N.V.N. 1998, 'Developing a philosophy of teaching statement', *Class Action*, vol. 1, no. 8, pp. 1–2.
- Faculty & TA Development 2005, *Developing a Teaching Portfolio: Guidance on Writing a Philosophy of Teaching Statement*, The Ohio State University. Available from: <[http://ftad.osu.edu/portfolio/philosophy/Phil\\_guidance.html](http://ftad.osu.edu/portfolio/philosophy/Phil_guidance.html)> [13 December 2006].
- Grasha, A. 2002, *Teaching with Style: A Practical Guide to Enhancing Learning by Understanding Teaching and Learning Styles*, Alliance, San Bernardino CA.
- Knight, P.T. 2002, *Being a Teacher in Higher Education*, SRHE & Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Loughran, J. 1996, *Developing Reflective Practice*, Falmer Press, London.
- Palmer, P. 1998, *The Courage to Teach*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Prosser, M. & Trigwell, K. 1999. *Understanding Learning and Teaching: The Experience in Higher Education*, SRHE & Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Ramsden, P. 2003, *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*, 2nd edn, RoutledgeFalmer, London.
- Rowland, S. 1998, 'Turning academics into teachers', *Teaching in Higher Education*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 133–139.
- Schönwetter, D.J., Sokal, L., Friesen, M. & Taylor, K.L. 2002, 'Teaching philosophies reconsidered: A conceptual model for the development and evaluation of teaching philosophy statements', *The International Journal for Academic Development*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 83–97.
- Skelton, A. 2005, *Understanding Teaching Excellence in Higher Education: Towards a Critical Approach*, Routledge, London.

---

<sup>1</sup> See <<http://www.iats.com/publications/TSI.html>>