

A NEW FACULTY PERSPECTIVE ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING

In *Writing a Statement of Teaching Philosophy: Fashioning a Framework for Your Classroom*, Brian Coppola has produced a well-crafted guide to organizing, expressing, and evaluating faculty ideas on teaching.

As a first year faculty member, I suddenly find myself with the enormous responsibility and privilege of influencing so many bright young minds. I did not get to this position by being a good teacher or through any formal training in education. Ironically, I got here by being a good student. So now it is time to teach. Where do I begin? Writing down a statement of teaching philosophy is, as Coppola suggests, an excellent starting point for planning and examining teaching practices.

Before applying for a faculty position, I had not given much serious thought to a grand philosophy on teaching. Writing a statement forced me to critically analyze my thinking about teaching and learning: the motivations, goals, and processes involved. To this list I would now add “assessment,” one of Coppola’s key points, as an equally important part of this thinking. With little actual teaching practice, I naturally turned to my own experiences as a student to begin formulating a plan. What worked for me? Coppola gives this advice to those who are skeptical about teaching philosophies, and I would add that drawing on experiences as a student is an excellent way for the novice teacher to start organizing his/her thoughts on teaching.

Coppola stresses the importance of continually documenting our growing perspectives on teaching by treating a teaching statement as a running document, constantly improving with our expanding perspective. As a new professor, my teaching experience grows rapidly, and it is important during this time to pay close attention to this process by frequently assessing new experiences and trying new approaches. Keeping an open mind, while always important, is easiest in the absence of experience.

Coppola’s article is remarkably accessible to teachers at all levels, from graduate students to distinguished professors. The rookie, like myself, benefits from the article as a guide to plotting a path and to organizing a good essay, while the veteran benefits from the reminder to continually reevaluate his approaches. The process of formulating a teaching statement helps us all to see the bigger picture.

Finally, I believe that honesty is the essential ingredient for growth. Coppola urges personal and sincere writing and honest evaluation of ourselves. He stresses the importance of engaging our colleagues in open discussion of our teaching philosophies. I could not agree more. I have benefited most from the many (sometimes brutally) honest discussions with my colleagues, friends, and mentors. This is an essential part of educating ourselves on teaching and learning. To further this cause, I encourage discussion across and outside of your institution to hear as many perspectives as possible. PKAL is a great resource for this. ■

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