

Engage, empower, evolve: Developing an institutional teaching philosophy to engage staff

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Writing a personal Teaching Philosophy Statement (TPS) can be useful for articulating espoused beliefs related to teaching and learning. In this paper, general approaches to the writing of a TPS are first explored, and the range of possible uses are examined. The article then goes on to consider the development and implementation of an institutional philosophy, outlining the approach taken at one college, along with the outcomes and resulting benefits. Pointers are provided for others who might wish to replicate the process in order to positively engage teachers at all stages of the teaching career lifecycle. The experience indicated that the process is as important as the final product, and that a TPS can have broad institutional application. It was recommended that a staff-facing TPS might work better than attempting to also make it student-facing.

Introduction

Teacher knowledge, beliefs and philosophies inform teaching practice and affect student outcomes (Caukin & Brinthaupt, 2017; Pajares, 1992). Borg's model of teacher cognition (2006, 2012) describes the complex relationship between beliefs, knowledge, theories, conceptions and teacher cognition, and identifies a range of factors that impact it. The literature has referred to the combined features of teacher cognition in numerous ways, including as the 'Wisdom of Practice' (WoP) (Chappell, 2017; Shulman, 2004). This WoP is predominantly developed during pre-service teacher training and in-service teacher development programs, and it generally becomes stable and deep-seated – but it is also implicit. Research has found that language teachers vary in their ability to articulate their personal theories and philosophies (Chappell et al., 2015), and that there can be a divergence between espoused beliefs and their manifestation in the classroom (Barnard & Burns, 2012; Basturkmen, 2012; Chappell, 2017). One tool to minimise any potential disconnect between beliefs and practice is the process of writing a Teaching Philosophy Statement (TPS), and the reflective practice inherent in this.

This article investigates the development of a TPS on both an individual and institutional level. In Part 1, the writing of a personal TPS is explored. In Part 2, the article goes beyond individual TPSs to consider the creation and implementation of an institutional philosophy. The approach taken at one institution is outlined, along with the outcomes and resulting benefits. Pointers are provided for others who might wish to replicate the TPS in order to positively engage teachers at all stages of the teaching career lifecycle.

Part 1: Developing an individual Teaching Philosophy Statement (TPS)

Overview of a TPS

Writing a Teaching Philosophy Statement is common in many teacher education and training programs (Caukin & Brinthaup, 2017, 2002; Shonwetter et al., 2002). Despite its ubiquity as an assessment task, it has been said that the writing of TPSs is ‘undertheorized, underscrutinized and underutilized’ (Alexander et al., 2012). This paper explains how they may be better exploited.

A TPS explicates the why, how and what of teaching (Goodyear & Allchin, 1998) and is a systematic statement of beliefs about teaching and learning in a teacher’s context, articulating what is often tacit. It may include reference to teacher and learner roles, views of learners’ goals, and how to operationalise beliefs to meet these goals. Typically quite concise (one to two pages), it tends to be written in narrative form in the first person and should be sincere, honest and specific, avoiding clichés and platitudes. It should be grounded in and aligned with theory to engage in the ‘scholarship of teaching’ (Trigwell et al., 2000). It should also consider the audience and intended purpose.

Summative and formative purposes for developing a TPS

There are a number of reasons for writing a TPS which can be characterised as summative and formative (Goodyear & Allchin, 1998; Hutchings & Shulman, 1999). Summative reasons refer to use of a TPS as part of an evaluation such as a job application or interview (Alexander et al., 2012; Beatty et al., 2009; Montell, 2003a, 2003b). It is becoming increasingly common to be asked about one’s philosophy of teaching and/or learning in interviews and it would be unfortunate to be caught out if you have not previously given this consideration. Interviewers might consider adding a question along these lines to their question bank to identify a candidate’s underpinning beliefs; responses to such questions can be instructive in identifying a good fit for your context. It may also be used for promotions.

During teacher education programs – be they pre-service or in-service – an assessment task related to explicating one’s personal teaching philosophy can be

utilised. Repeated or longitudinal drafting of a TPS during teacher education programs can evidence professional growth over time. A TPS can act as one component of a formal 'Professional Development and Review' for more experienced teaching staff. Teachers might also be required to reflect on how their practice has developed over the year as part of the formal institutional appraisal system.

Recently, there has been a move to recognising excellence in teaching (rather than research) through institutional and national awards, especially in the higher education sector. Teaching award applications often require reflection on one's approach and explication of an underpinning philosophy. For example, ELICOS teachers in Australia may apply for a fellowship from the Higher Education Academy (HEA, 2018), now called Advance HE, which includes a reflection on teaching practice and beliefs against a set of criteria.

It is perhaps more usual to write a TPS for formative purposes. A TPS is useful at any stage of the career lifecycle of a teacher as it forces us to articulate and prioritise our beliefs and can guide teaching behaviours. For early career teachers or trainees, it can provide an opportunity to reflect on practice and connect it to theoretical input. For experienced teachers, it can be used as a mechanism to consider beliefs that may have become procedural and implicit over time. Making our values explicit can reignite dedication and ownership of our values or even be used to remediate and, therefore, should continue through our teaching career as a dynamic and iterative process (Chism, 1998; Coppola, 2002). The writing of a TPS can be driven by the individual or by peers or supervisors as part of a professional development program, ideally linked to an observation (by a supervisor or peer) in order to minimise any disconnect between theory and classroom practice. It may comprise one component of a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) framework such as the English Australia framework (2019) or a CPD portfolio required for accreditation with BALEAP (2019). Needs can be determined and matched to the framework for institutional PD and/or it can be used for tracking individual progress. An individual TPS might also be used as a springboard to an institutional philosophy as described in Part 2.

Approaches to structuring a TPS

The literature illustrates that writing a TPS is complex as it will need to reflect individual teaching contexts and disciplines as well as personal beliefs. Therefore, there is a range of ways to organise one but a standard structure or framework can guide and support the explication of underlying beliefs. A traditional structure was provided by Chism (1998):

1. Conceptualisations of learning

How do you think your students learn?

2. Conceptualisations of teaching

What you think your role is in this process?

3. Your goals for your students

What do you think your students should learn?

4. How you make it happen

This is the implementation of your teaching philosophy and where you provide evidence to show you do what you preach.

5. Your action plan

This might include your professional development agenda.

Schonwetter et al. (2002) also developed a conceptual framework for the writing of a TPS comprising six phases, in which the first three are similar to Chism's:

1. Definition of teaching
2. Definition of learning
3. View of the learner
4. Goals and expectations of the student-teacher relationship
5. Discussion of teaching methods
6. Discussion of evaluation

A more recent heuristic specifically in the field of second language teaching was developed by Chappell (2017). This approach supports the link between the WoP and classroom practice through three core phases in an iterative process:

1. Articulating

To document and question one's philosophical stances towards language, language learning, and language teaching.

2. Interrogating

To compare and weigh up theoretical and philosophical orientations of those stances.

3. Implementing

To make decisions which may lead to changes in theoretical knowledge that, in turn, may inform changes to your WoP.

Some staff may still find it challenging to get started. Writing sessions can be organised to allow staff to generate their response; communal writing of this kind is often referred to as ‘Shut Up and Write’ (SUAW) – especially in HDR doctoral studies writing – and is a common and effective approach to generate output. Another way is to have staff respond to a set of sentence stems. ‘I believe’ statements have been found to be particularly accessible to scaffold a TPS (Caukin & Brinthaupt, 2017):

- As a teacher, I believe . . .
- My role as a teacher is to . . .
- My students need to be able to . . .

Example 1 in the Appendix follows this approach using ‘I believe’ as a stem.

It is also common when writing a TPS to use a critical incident or metaphor and this can help teachers commence the process (Coppola, 2002; Shonwetter et al., 2002). Teaching might be compared to being a gardener, or a chef using raw ingredients, or the captain of a ship on unknown waters. Example 2 in the Appendix uses the metaphor of punk rock, for example; it attracted attention within the University and an article was shared within the teaching community (Mantai, 2018). Metaphors, however, only go so far and tend to break down but they can be useful starting points.

Freedom can be given for teachers to provide a TPS in whatever format or medium they prefer, and the literature suggests that there are affordances in using digital media and technology (Alexander et al., 2012). It is even possible to create a visual representation of a TPS.

Part 2: Developing an institutional philosophy

An individual TPS can be used as a springboard to an organisational TPS. Some authors have suggested that co-constructing and sharing TPSs can engender improved reflection and make teachers more accountable (Caukin & Brinthaupt, 2017; Schonwetter, et al., 2002). The benefits of an institutional TPS are as much in the actual process of co-construction as in the final product. In educational contexts with high numbers of casual staff, a sense of community and shared identity can be low, and an organisational TPS can serve as a tool to overcome this in a similar way to how a values or purpose statement might provide broader organisational direction.

The literature provides mixed evidence on the effect of institutional/organisational values and purpose statements if they result from a top-down approach. However, we know that co-constructing with staff can improve ownership, agency and a sense of community. Therefore, the question is whether co-constructing a shared TPS might have the same positive effect. Research undertaken by the McKinsey Organisation

shows that there are three conditions for peak performance in staff: i) role clarity, ii) trust and collaboration, and iii) the excitement and challenge of doing something that matters (Cranston & Keller, 2013). Developing a statement of purpose often aims to capture this latter notion of 'doing something that matters'. This has also been referred to as a 'meaning quotient' (MQ), as issues in the workplace that preclude peak performance are almost always due to low MQ. Cooperrider's Appreciative Inquiry is a model that similarly takes a social constructionist approach to the co-constructing of a desired and compelling future state by focusing on what people care about (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001). The same underpinning approach might therefore be employed in the co-construction of a TPS to provide the three principles of role clarity, collaboration and a focus on 'doing something that matters'.

Our approach

To avoid a top-down approach, the area of the University responsible for academic staff professional development was engaged to lead a think-tank for our senior academic team. At the time, we had not worked together for very long and one reason for the think-tank was to find commonalities in our beliefs about teaching and learning as a team-building activity. This would also allow us to develop our 'meaning quotient' and the three conditions for peak performance mentioned above. The facilitators liaised with me over the desired outcomes and sessions were scheduled once a week over a two-month period. I attended as a participant rather than as a manager.

The facilitators used a wiki for sharing ideas. Using a flipped classroom approach, they posted blogs and articles for the team to read and reflect on the theory underpinning learning and teaching prior to the face-to-face session. After discussion, we wrote our own TPSs from sentence stems such as:

- We believe in/that . . .
- Our staff value . . .
- Our students will be able to . . .

Some completed stems are shown in Figure 1.

1. Try these sentence starters to develop a shared statement:

We believe in/that . . .

in inspiring and supporting our students to maximise their potential

in maximising 'time on task' and prompt feedback

in respecting diverse talents and ways of learning

in setting high expectations and helping students reach these goals

Our students will be/do/make

make the transition successfully to their undergraduate program

engage in active, deep learning

take responsibility for their own learning and seek help from staff

become part of a community with other students and staff

Figure 1. Sample sentence stems

We posted our individual TPSs on the wiki and other team members were invited to comment as suggested by Trigwell et al. (2000) (see Appendix). Some participants referred to theorists and literature that had inspired them such as Freire (1970), Ramsden (2003) and Shohamy (2001). Others simply responded to colleagues from the heart ('I definitely wanna be in your class :)'). There was no set requirement.

Using these posts as a basis, we discussed similarities in the conceptualisations in our individual TPSs, considering key notions for our institutional context, such as active learning and student-centred teaching, and defined what these meant to us. Over several weeks, we amended and honed versions until we felt that we had ideas worth sharing more widely with teachers and students. This process was highly collaborative, though it did take some time to craft into a succinct version. We ran PD sessions for teachers and focus groups with students to share our ideas. After several sessions of feedback and amendments, teaching staff were invited to vote on the preferred wording via an anonymous survey. The response rate was 40%. Two senior staff ran a focus group with international and domestic Foundation and Diploma students to

solicit their feedback and whether the TPS had resonance with them. From this final version, we designed an image and a video. We shared the image digitally and in hard copy with the teaching team, making it visible around the teaching staff areas. It also forms part of our induction process for new teaching staff.

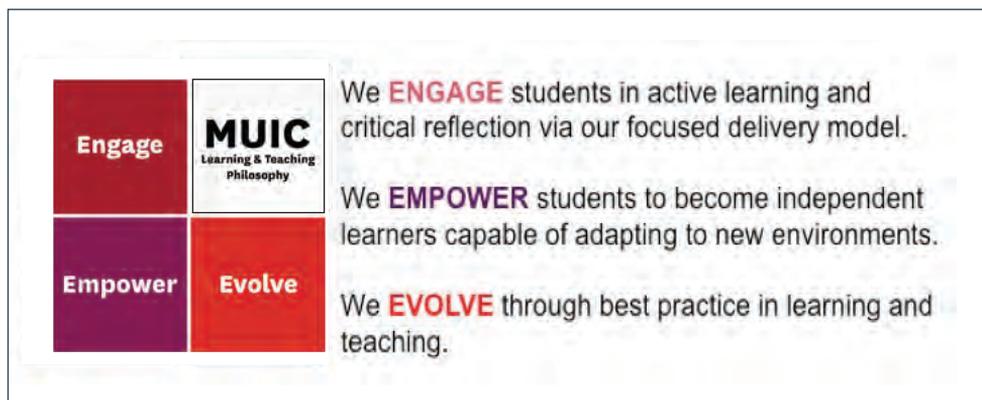


Figure 2. Institutional teaching philosophy

Outcomes and further institutional use

The process described above helped us build rapport and get to know each other as a new team. It provided clarity on our shared purpose and made us explicitly consider 'what matters'. It also provided shared nomenclature. Indeed, the terms 'engage, empower, evolve' are now regularly cited by teachers in the staffroom and during PD sessions.

Importantly, the TPS was the springboard for further institutional uses. We developed guidelines for our curriculum redevelopment project focusing explicitly on 'engage' and 'empower'. Curriculum writers came to understand the need to use engaging activities, flipped classroom approach, blended learning and authentic assessment, for example. Assessment profiles moved away from exams and tests to be more varied and engaging. The TPS also legitimised the work of our PD Working Group ('empower') and the ensuing PD ('evolve') for teachers themselves. A few months later, the TPS led to the development of a Teaching and Learning Strategy to operationalise the TPS with measurable goals. It ultimately resulted in the development of an institutional Teaching Excellence Framework. This work would have been more challenging without the shared TPS at the core.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that a TPS can have positive impacts for the individual and the institution. It can anchor teachers' professional identities and provide the opportunity to conceptualise and articulate implicit beliefs and support professional growth. It also led to a range of teaching and learning outputs in the institution more broadly.

Although the process was successful and did get traction from staff, we learnt a number of lessons along the way. One of the main aims was team-building for the senior team, and the process was as important as the ensuing philosophy. However, we should have brought more teachers into the process earlier. This would have created more of a challenge to gain consensus on the wording but would have given them more ownership over the final product. One solution to this would have been to create a working party early on with representation from various groups.

A second issue was around the third component 'evolve'. This has arguably been the least successful from a student perspective. The notion of 'evolve' works well for staff in terms of professional development. However, the student focus groups indicated limited understanding of this concept. We would have done well to heed their response and to have amended the wording, or to have decided whether the TPS was intended to be student-facing as well as staff-facing. It is suggested that institutions involve as many stakeholders as is practical in the process, as the process is as important as the product, but consider whether the final product will be staff-facing or student-facing (or both) from the outset. In retrospect, it might have been preferable to make our TPS staff-facing as this would have freed us up to use more precise language without compromising to ensure student comprehension.

In conclusion, the process of developing an institutional TPS worked well in our context and has had numerous benefits in terms of team-building and engaging staff, as well as providing a shared direction and nomenclature. It is hoped that other institutions considering embarking on the development of a TPS for their college might find some benefit from our experience.

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Pamela Humphreys is Director at Macquarie University International College and English Language Centre and has worked in international education for 30 years. Her PhD thesis, awarded the 2016 IEAA outstanding thesis award, investigated the construct of English language proficiency in higher education. Pamela is a Senior Fellow of the HEA and IEAA, and a TEQSA Expert.

APPENDIX

EXAMPLES OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHIES

Example 1: Standard TPS



Pamela's Teaching Philosophy

Edited by Pamela Humphreys,

Sunday 11 March 2018, 6.53PM

I believe that learning is socially constructed. i.e. meaning is socially situated and constructed through meaningful interactions and collaboration with others and is heavily influenced by context (i.e. social constructivism).

Therefore....

Teaching is not a case of the 'jug and mug', a case of filling an empty vessel with content. We should focus on the learner not the teacher, and consider how to engage and motivate them, building from what they already know to activate existing schemata. The teacher is the expert and aware of the critical content to be learnt but the teacher should be a 'guide on the side' more than the 'sage on the stage'. I believe students need to experience it for it to be memorable i.e. guided discovery is generally preferable to a purely deductive and didactic approach, although there is a place for the latter.

I believe in being explicit to learners about what we're learning and why, and giving a helicopter view of how the content fits together. I therefore believe in a holistic rather than atomistic approach.

I believe in cultivating independence in our learners through scaffolded support so that students can move from not being able to do something through the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and on to independence (i.e. sociocultural theory).

I believe in teaching, learning and assessing *procedural* knowledge, not only *declarative* knowledge (Anderson).

I believe in assessment *for* learning (formative) not just assessment *of* learning (summative) and ensuring positive washback when designing assessment items through consideration of not only reliability, validity and practicality but also impact (VRIP) (Shohamy; Saville)

I believe that, as teachers, we should be *reflective practitioners*, considering our learners regularly and being aware of our impact on them.

Comments



Pedagogy of the oppressed

Monday, 12 March 2018, 10:44 AM

by [Can Yalinkaya](#)

Hi Pamela,

I totally agree with your comments on socially constructed learning. One of the approaches that has been influential in my own teaching philosophy has been Paul Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1993), in which he criticises "the banking concept of education", in which "education becomes an act of depositing". This concept situates teachers and students as opposites and constructs teachers as "all-knowing" and students as "know-nothings". It is an oppressive teaching philosophy which produces passive and compliant students/citizens who are incapable (or unwilling) to make any change in the world. If we are to encourage students to be active agents of positive change we should avoid oppressive approaches to learning and "reconcile" the constructed contradiction between students and teachers, whose roles might be interchangeable in a classroom environment.

Example 2: Metaphorical TPS



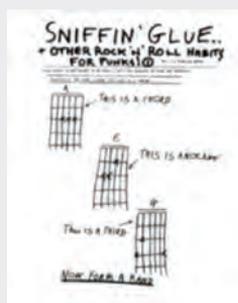
Teaching and Learning the Punk Rock Way

Monday, 12 March 2018, 10:24 AM

by Can Yalinkaya

Punk Rock shaped my teaching philosophy.

It is 1976, and Mark Perry has just released his influential fanzine, Sniffin' Glue, a self-published periodical which becomes the chronicler and educator of a subculture and movement. A famous section from Sniffin' Glue, provides instructions on how to play guitar and form a band with only three chords.



Punk Rock was notoriously D.I.Y. (Do it Yourself). Anyone could form a band, and anyone could organise gigs, write and publish fanzines ('zines) and express themselves in creative ways. They didn't need permission from higher authorities or gate keepers.

In an education context, I believe in helping students gain the punk ethics of D.I.Y. Now this might sound like I am in support of students undertaking tasks when they do not have enough expertise, or when they are underprepared (e.g. forming a band when you only know how to play three chords). However, I see in punk rock an opportunity for student-centred teaching and learning. Punk rock is a call for action, rather than asking people to be spectators. It provides a frame of mind in which one is not afraid to make mistakes.

A punk rock teaching philosophy asks students to take responsibility for their learning by being active learners by 'doing' (learning to play the three chords) and participating (joining a band). Thus, I am a strong believer in problem-based learning, where students are presented with an unfamiliar problem or task and they are expected to solve the problem by themselves. Team-based learning and peer learning are also effective approaches for students to learn the punk rock way.

The teacher's role is to provide guidance and be a critical friend. As a lifelong learner, the teacher is at times a peer. In a punk rock classroom, teaching and learning should be a dialogue, rather than the teacher being a fountain of all knowledge.

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Comments



Kimberley's response

Monday 12 March 2018, 6.53PM

by Kimberley Duncan

Of course your post is the most fun one!
I definitely want to be in your class :)

[Delete](#)