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4 Steps to a Memorable Teaching Philosophy



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By James M. Lang

This summer I observed, with as much empathy as I could muster, the labors of two colleagues and friends who were preparing their tenure cases. Both of them asked me for advice about the area in which they thought I might have a little expertise: the statement of their teaching philosophy and principles.

Around the same time, I also received a request from a reader asking me for advice on writing a teaching statement for the job-market season. The question was the same: How do you write a statement of teaching philosophy that doesn't sound exactly like everybody else's?

In my 10 years as a tenure-track or tenured professor, I have served on more than a half-dozen search committees, all of which required statements of teaching philosophy from our candidates. Reading through those many hundreds of statements put me in the mind of a line from a Paul Simon song, "All Around the World or the Myth of Fingerprints": "I have seen them all, and man, they're all the same."

The same basic ideas and buzzwords appear in just about every teaching statement I have ever read. Everybody cares about the students, wants to challenge them, runs a student-centered classroom, relies on a mixture of lecture and discussion or other techniques, puts students first, is available to students outside the classroom, loves teaching, has learned a lot from students, integrates research and teaching, and so on and so on.

I have no doubt that most of the authors of those generic statements believe what they write, and do their best to live up to their principles. But I'm equally sure that, while a generic teaching statement won't hurt your job application or your tenure file, it won't do anything to help you, either. Its main effect will be to deepen the glaze on the eyes of readers—whether they are on a search committee or a tenure panel—who are slogging through statement after statement, searching for any evidence that will distinguish you from your fellow applicants.

The hiring season looms now, and most tenure files will be due in just a few weeks. In a late effort to help my colleagues and readers, I offer four simple guidelines for constructing a statement of teaching philosophy that will reflect your principles and help you stand apart from the crowd.

Begin with the end. A teaching statement resembles a syllabus in that you should begin by thinking about the end. Picture a student walking out of the final exam of your course: In what way is that student different from the one who entered your classroom on the first day of the semester? What has the student learned over the course of the past three months?

You can think about that question in terms of both knowledge and skills. Do you want students to have acquired some new body of knowledge? If so, why? In what way does the acquisition of that new knowledge benefit the student or the world? Will it help the student get a job? Succeed in future courses? Live a more meaningful life?

Perhaps your focus is on helping students develop certain skills—the ability to write more persuasively, think more clearly, offer more effective presentations, solve certain kinds of problems. Again, be prepared both to articulate the precise skills that the students will have gained in your courses and the reasons those skills are important. Don't take either for granted.

Most of us probably envision our courses as helping students acquire both knowledge and skills. Your teaching statement can parse your objectives in both categories.

Make distinctions. Unless you are seeking promotion or applying for a job at a major research university, you will probably find yourself teaching two kinds of courses: (1) those that draw upon your area of research and are aimed at majors in your discipline; and (2) service courses that your department must offer to fulfill core requirements for graduation. In my case, I teach both upper-level courses in 20th-century British literature (my area of scholarship) and introductory courses in literature and writing.

In teaching those two types of classes, I have different objectives and use different approaches. The courses for our majors are more content-oriented; the ones that fulfill our general-education

requirements are more skills-oriented. I describe the differences in the way I teach them in my own statement of teaching philosophy.

You might be able to construct objectives that are common to both your upper-level and introductory courses. For example, my desire to increase my students' attentiveness to the written word, and its effects in the world, would apply to both my composition courses and my "Contemporary British Novel" course. However, sometimes such broad objectives tip too far toward the abstract or the generic to mean much of anything.

Be specific. The ends that you articulate will have to be at least a little abstract, which means that your next step—and the most important one, in my estimation—must be to find ways to make your philosophy concrete. You can do that quite simply by telling a story or offering a detailed description of an innovative or interesting teaching strategy you have used.

I consider a teaching statement to fall under the genre of creative nonfiction. As every teacher in that field knows, the first inclination students have when they are assigned to write an essay of creative nonfiction is to explain everything. They spill out expository prose from start to finish. As every reader of nonfiction knows, readers remember and respond to your stories, not your explanations.

So as soon as you describe your teaching objectives in the statement, tell a story or two about how your objectives have played out in the classroom. The story might focus on a particularly enlightening moment, in class or with an individual student. It might even be a moment of failure that led you to develop a new way of teaching.

If you can't or don't want to write about a specific moment or incident, then be specific by writing about some creative strategy or assignment you have used. Describe it in detail. In a two-page teaching statement, most readers would welcome a full paragraph of details about a technique you have used and refined and want the world to know about.

In the countless meetings I have sat through to discuss the applications of job candidates, the only times I have ever heard a teaching philosophy mentioned has been in reference to some memorable and specific story or strategy that a candidate described. I promise you that nobody sitting in one of those meetings will hold up your file triumphantly and announce: "Folks, we can all go home. I have found the one candidate who believes in running a student-centered classroom!"

Cite your sources. Whatever philosophies you have about teaching, where did they come from? Your own experiences as an undergraduate? A faculty mentor you worked with in graduate school? Books or articles on teaching?

Whatever your sources, it reflects well on you to explain how and why you have developed your teaching principles. And doing so allows you to add another narrative element to your statement.

Suppose that your philosophy was developed by observing and working with an outstanding teacher at your graduate university. Acknowledging that debt in your statement demonstrates

your eagerness to credit those who have helped you along the way, and your willingness to learn from mentors.

Suppose, by contrast, that you have developed your ideas from reading a few highly regarded books on teaching and learning. Acknowledging those sources demonstrates that you take teaching seriously enough to view it as a discipline worthy of study—a commitment that will certainly sit well with search committees and tenure panels at teaching-focused institutions.

The story of how you developed your teaching philosophy can make for a great opening. It will immediately set your statement apart from those—and they are legion—that begin with a standard expository paragraph.

If you follow my advice, you're probably still going to end up with a teaching statement that looks pretty similar to the rest of them in some ways. Every fingerprint has swirly lines, and every teaching philosophy will very likely include whatever buzzwords and catchphrases are making the rounds in academe.

The best you can hope for is that, if you take the time to craft a good one, the same principle that applies to fingerprints will apply to teaching philosophies: They may all look the same to the untrained eye, but the experts can tell them apart.

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