

Writing a statement of teaching philosophy

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Rationale

There is good reason to suppose that a teacher's values make a difference both to learner experience in the classroom and to the teacher's professional identity and career trajectory. Evidence for this can be found in teacher education and development policies referring to values and moral purpose and in the growing popularity since 1980 of the statement of teaching philosophy (STP), which has become a constituent of many teaching portfolios. Indeed, an STP is now required by some interviewers at the IATEFL job fair, and the attendance of two of the workshop participants was a direct result of their interview experience.

Challenges

As well as providing a more personal dimension to a teacher's profile, the self-reflection required to write a statement can be an enlightening and motivating experience in itself. It encourages teachers to reflect on key areas of practice and to recognise their overarching motivation for being in the profession. Despite the statement's utility and currency, however, personal values are difficult to articulate, and there is little consensus on the STP's generic conventions (Schönwetter et al, 2002). Further, whilst it may be tailored towards a particular aspect of professional practice, the STP must necessarily reflect a teacher's own approach and experience through the choice of key metaphors and narrative. Through the presentation of vox pop extracts, models and discussion, the workshop offered a social space for participants to explore these complex themes and draft a personal document.

Approach

A statement of teaching philosophy can be defined as 'a systematic and critical rationale that focuses on the important components defining effective teaching and learning in a particular discipline and/or institutional context' (Schönwetter et al 2002: 84). What is effective teaching and learning? The workshop began with some short film extracts of English language teachers describing their 'best' teacher. The answers were diverse and included several patient Maths teachers and a Geography teacher who 'got outstanding results through a regime of fear ... but still gained lots of respect'. The diversity of the answers illustrated how, for learners, good teachers can come from an amazingly large constituency and perhaps helps to explain the popularity of both student-centred and subject-centred teaching and the historical swing between behaviourism and humanism. The curious can input the phrase 'statement of teaching philosophy' in the bibliometric tool Google Ngram Viewer and observe the spike that occurs 1900-1910, explained by Dewey's work on reflection being interrupted by the new interest in behavioural learning (see von Wright 1992: 59).

Structure

Adapting the prompts in O'Neal et al (2007), the workshop divided the STP into 7 sections:

1. Heading (metaphor)
2. Starting questions
3. Teaching methodology
4. Teaching situation
5. Favourite activity
6. Assessment
7. Challenges

It is a well-known axiom in the social sciences that eliciting background information from respondents can prime them for more complex questions; so the workshop began with participants discussing their teaching situation (Section 4) and going on to describe their favourite classroom activity (Section 5). Where did participants' preferred assessment approach (Section 6) lie on the clines of learning payoff for students / ease of administration, eg setting multiple choice questions vs a researched essay? Participants next considered some rhetorical questions such as 'Why do I teach?', which could be genuine puzzles or dilemmas, to place at the start of the STP as organisational prompts (Section 2). They reflected on their preferred teaching approaches, eg communicative, and where possible related them to theory, eg Krashen (Section 3). They then thought about the challenges they faced, eg in resources or teaching accommodation, and how they met them (Section 7).

To elicit abstract entities like metaphors (Section 1), participants watched extracts of teachers talking about their metaphors for teaching and learning. Prefixing some of their answers with comments like 'That's a difficult one', the responses on film ranged from 'a journey' to 'a chicken farm in which students are force-fed information'. (For more ideas, see <http://www.learner.org/workshops/nextmove/metaphor/>) Metaphors could be used as a heading, followed by an optional quotation, for example:

- 'Mediation: A statement of teaching philosophy by A J Smith'
- Teaching is the achievement of shared meaning (D B Gowin)

More quotations like the above can be found at www.ntlf.com or similar sites.

Having sketched the bare ingredients of an STP in the workshop, it remained for participants to expand and redraft their notes, making adjustments for a particular purpose such as a job application, and to recognise that the process of writing an STP is an ongoing part of continuing professional development.

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References

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