

***Writing a Philosophy of Teaching***

James H. Korn  
Saint Louis University

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A philosophy of teaching is a teacher’s conscience. In this essay, I will try to show how a written philosophy statement is helpful as a guide to what we do as teachers and how it can shape our teaching identity. For beginning teachers, writing this statement reveals the choices you must make in developing your teaching style. For those with more experience, the writing a philosophy can be a form of renewal.

First, I wonder how many readers already have written their philosophy. I wrote my first version only eight years ago, after I had been teaching for thirty years. If you have never written your philosophy of teaching, I suggest that before you read this essay you take time now to write it. To help you with that task, I have added an appendix with suggestions on how to proceed. If you want to try this, skip, hop, or scroll to the appendix; and follow the instructions. It is important that you not read the essay before you write your first draft.

“Philosophy” is a good label to apply to this statement. An acceptable definition for this term is that “philosophy is rationally critical thinking, of a more or less systematic kind about the general nature of the world . . . , the justification of belief . . . , and the conduct of life . . .” (Honderich, 1995, p. 666) That definition can be particularized to the world, beliefs, and conduct of teachers.

All teachers have an implicit philosophy that could be inferred from their behavior such as statements in a syllabus, the nature of assignments, and how they interact with students. I know award-winning teachers who never have written a philosophy statement, so I can not argue that you will not be successful if you do not make your philosophy of teaching explicit. However, I do think it can help all of us to put our teaching philosophy in writing. As Kurt Lewin said, “there is nothing as practical as a good theory.” The theory (your philosophy statement) can increase your understanding of what you plan to do in your teaching (design) and what you did (results).

Why did I make such a fuss about writing your philosophy before reading this essay? The main reason is that this should be your philosophy, influenced as little as possible by the ideas of others at the time you write it, especially if you are writing it for the first time. In the appendix I suggest some exercises that will stimulate your thoughts about your own experiences as a student and a teacher and help reveal your beliefs about teaching, but I do not tell you what the content of your essay should be. I don’t prescribe a form for the essay. It could be a standard essay with an introduction and conclusion or summary; or it might be in the form of a numbered list of your principles; or you might write a story or poem. Whatever your philosophy of teaching is, it should be yours.

How long should it be? The answer to this question depends on your audience. People who may want to hire you probably don't want to read more than two pages. However, a much longer version might be written when you are trying to clarify your ideas for yourself or as a written conversation with peers. A few great teachers have presented their philosophies in books: William James in *Talks to Teachers*, Parker Palmer (1998) in *The Courage to Teach*, and Bill McKeachie in *Teaching Tips*. The 11<sup>th</sup> edition of *Tips* is a good example of how philosophy informs practice. In several places McKeachie reveals his philosophy of teaching. He is student-centered and promotes active learning techniques to involve students. His teaching is informed by research and also by his values, including his religious values. The last page of the book shows his commitment to the life of a teacher.

Once you have written the first version of your own philosophy, you are ready to put it to work. There are two general uses of a philosophy statement: guidance and reflection.

### Guidance

Your philosophy influences your decisions about course planning. Consider how different teachers might state course objectives and measure student achievement of those objectives. There could be an emphasis on definitions, facts, and findings or on major ideas and applications, and one teacher may want to cover all topics in the textbook, while another teacher may prefer greater depth in selected topics. I can imagine one philosophy stating that knowledge in psychology is built on facts and that an educated student should learn about all topics. Another teacher believes that facts will be forgotten, so students should learn the big ideas in psychology and how to use them. A third teacher's philosophy may say nothing about content, but show concern for stimulating appreciation of psychology as a science and excitement for learning.

Our beliefs about how to relate to students are seen even in our policies concerning attendance and making up missed examinations. For example, I have seen statements that teachers "respect students as adults and independent learners" along with a syllabus that has strict rules about deducting grade points for so many unexcused absences. Comparisons like this help teachers think through what they do, and to revise either their practice or theory or both.

### Reflection

In addition to believing in the practical value of a good theory, Kurt Lewin also thought that practical experience was the best way to develop theories. At the end of a semester we sit with our grade distributions and student evaluations, and think about what happened in our courses, what pleased us and what needs improvement. Comparing that experience with our philosophy helps to put the semester in perspective. The things that please us should be related to what is considered to be most important in our philosophy, and we will want to work to improve those same things if our experience reveals that improvement is needed. Sometimes, however, experience leads us to reconsider our beliefs about teaching. For example, we may decide that the freshmen in our introductory courses really are not adults and we need to use a more authoritarian approach.

Discovery is a major benefit of reflection. You can discover inconsistencies between your theory and practice of teaching, but beyond that,

A clearly articulated philosophy gives substance and coherence to the brainstorming and fantasies of reflection. Sometimes reflection should be detached from the data of the classroom and allowed to spring from the imagination. Challenge all the conventional wisdom about teaching and create an ideal learning world. Go where no academic mind has gone before. Then return and translate your most creative thoughts to ideas and ideals that you want to have an influence on your teaching and include these in your philosophy (Korn, 2002, p. 207).

If you write or have written a statement of your teaching philosophy I urge you to put to work because it is the process of thinking, writing, doing, and reflection that produces the benefits for understanding your teaching. These benefits will continue, if you regularly review and revise your philosophy during the course of your teaching career as you have experiences and insights that cause you to reflect on teaching as a way of life.

On the other hand, after reading this essay, you may conclude that writing a philosophy of teaching is a waste, and your time is better spent revising a lecture or designing a new learning activity. If so, I hope you recognize that this action-orientation is your philosophy.

#### References

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#### APPENDIX

Instructions for Writing a Teaching Philosophy

Write your philosophy of teaching.

The primary reason for asking you to do this without preparation and suggestions is that this **YOUR PHILOSOPHY** should be your philosophy, not that of some expert. It should be yours in form as well as content. You are not starting from a blank slate, but from years of experience as a student and perhaps with some teaching experience. So just do it; let the force be with you. The only requirements are that you write in the first person (this is your philosophy) and use non-technical language.

If you already have written something like this, do not go and pull it out of a file or even out of your memory. Take a fresh approach to the task, as if doing it for the first time.

Find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed. Think for a while about teaching and whatever that brings to mind, perhaps occasionally jotting a note. Then do some free writing, where you write continuously without stopping to criticize your ideas. Next reflect on what you have written, and then re-write it giving it some organization.

Please do this now before reading further.

Try these exercises to stimulate your thinking about teaching.

1. Think of the best teacher you ever had, or a composite of several good teachers. What characteristics made them good? Do the same for the worst teacher(s) you have had.
2. Mind-mapping. Take a large sheet of paper. Write the word teaching in the middle. Around that word write other words, phrases, or pictures that relate to teaching. Then, for each of those words, etc., write words, phrases, or pictures that come to mind. The result may be a complex picture (map) of your ideas about teaching. Use colors or lines to link these ideas.
3. Think of a metaphor that you want to use to describe your teaching. For example, one teacher described himself as a border collie herding sheep; another said she was a wilderness guide. Explain why the metaphor applies to you, but also think of ways in which it does not apply.

Now revise your essay **AND CONTINUE TO REVISE IT OVER AND OVER AGAIN DURING THE COURSE OF YOUR TEACHING CAREER AS YOU HAVE EXPERIENCES AND INSIGHTS THAT CAUSE YOU TO REFLECT ON TEACHING AS A CAREER AND AS A WAY OF LIFE.**