Exploring Your Teaching Philosophy: Sample Exercises

Developing a working philosophy of teaching

(adapted from Apps, J. (1991). *Mastering the Teaching of Adults*. Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Co., pp. 27-35)

Respond to the following prompts in developing a comprehensive record of your beliefs about the various aspects of teaching and learning:

1. Why do you believe your students want to learn? Describe them as learners in any way you can.
2. What are your aims for teaching? What do you hope to accomplish when you teach? What do your aims say about you as a teacher?
3. Does your subject matter affect your beliefs about teaching or learning? If so, explain how.
4. Create a list in response to the following prompt: “When I teach I:” Once you’ve created the list, reflect on why you do what you do.
5. What do you believe about learning? How would you describe it? What are your sources for your beliefs?

From the information you record, you should gain a better understanding of yourself as a teacher. Key themes should emerge to help you create your teaching philosophy.

Thinking as a teacher

(adapted from Apps, J. (1991). *Mastering the Teaching of Adults*. Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Co., pp. 23-24)

On a sheet of paper or in your teaching journal, draw a picture of yourself working as a teacher. What metaphor does the picture suggest for your teaching? Here are some sample metaphors. Ask yourself where do you fit and why? If you don’t fit anywhere, come up with your own metaphor and explain it briefly. Then consider why your metaphor does not fit with those listed. What do you believe or value instead? This should help emphasize what is important to you as a teacher and reveal why you do what you do.

* **Lamplighters** - They attempt to illuminate the minds of their learners.
* **Gardeners** - Their goal is to cultivate the mind by nourishing, enhancing the climate, removing the weeds and other impediments, and then standing back and allowing growth to occur.
* **Muscle builders** - They exercise and strengthen flabby minds so learners can face the heavyweight learning tasks of the future.
* **Bucket fillers** - They pour information into empty containers with the assumption that a filled bucket is a good bucket. In other words, a head filled with information makes an educated person.
* **Challengers** - They question learners’ assumptions, helping them see subject matter in fresh ways and develop critical thinking skills.
* **Travel guides** - They assist people along the path of learning.
* **Factory supervisors** - They supervise the learning process, making certain that sufficient inputs are present and that the outputs are consistent with the inputs.
* **Artists** - For them teaching has no prescriptions and the ends are not clear at the beginning of the process. The entire activity is an aesthetic experience.
* **Applied scientists** - They apply research findings to teaching problems and see scientific research as the basis for teaching.
* **Craftspeople** - They use various teaching skills and are able to analyze teaching situations, apply scientific findings when applicable, and incorporate an artistic dimension into teaching.

Self-reflective interview

(adapted from Grasha, A. (1996). *Teaching With Style*. Pittsburgh, PA: Alliance Publishers, p. 55).

Imagine that a reporter from a teaching journal asks to interview you for a special section on the qualities of effective teachers. How would you respond to the following questions:

* What is a “personal best” achievement for you as a teacher during the past year?
* Who is the best teacher you have ever known? What personal qualities made this person a great teacher?
* How do the qualities of the best teacher you knew appear in your instruction?
* If you could give others a gift-wrapped box that contained the best qualities of your teaching style, what items would that box contain?
* If you could put the worst qualities you have as a teacher in the trash, what would you throw away?
* What is one action you need to take to give up one or more of the latter qualities?
* If you wrote a book about teaching, what would the title be? What are three points about instruction you would make?

Personal definition of teaching

(adapted from Grasha, A. (1996). *Teaching With Style*. Pittsburgh, PA: Alliance Publishers, pp.112-115).

In articulating your definition of teaching, it is often helpful to carefully analyze your definition to ensure that it is comprehensive and clear to readers other than ourselves. To do this, we need to unpack the terminology we use. Respond to the following prompts to help clarify your personal definition of teaching.

* What is your personal definition of teaching?
* What key phrases or words in your definition are absolutely critical for someone else to understand your approach to teaching?
* What does each key word or phrase mean to you?
* In reviewing your expanded definition, what would you drop, modify, or add? Give a reason for your response.

For example, a personal definition could be: Teaching is a process of internal and external dialogue about things of importance conducted with passion and discipline. Key words to further explain could be: process, internal and external dialogue, importance, passion, and discipline.

Critical moments in teaching

(adapted from Palmer, P. (1993). “Good Talk about Good Teaching” in *Change* 25(6), pp. 8-13).

Think about a course you have taught. Draw an arrow from left to right in your journal and fit along the arrow the “critical moments” that you experienced as the course progressed. Moments that occurred early in the course would be on the left. A “critical moment” occurs when a learning opportunity either opens up or shuts down for your students, depending on how you respond. Sample critical moments could include the first day of class, the first “stupid” question, the first graded assignment, or the first time the class understands a complex concept. Pick 3-4 moments that really stand out for you and describe how you responded to them – for better or for worse. If your response was not ideal, what would do another time you encountered a similar situation?

Reflection cues for writing a teaching philosophy

(adapted from the University of Iowa’s web site: www.uiowa.edu/~c07p385/reflection-cues.html).

Read through the questions below and respond to those that spark your interest:

* Why do I teach the way I do?
* Why am I a teacher?
* What motivated me to select a career path that includes teaching?
* What is my personal definition of a great teacher and what experience formed that definition?
* What do I believe about teaching and learning?
* What do I want my students to gain from my classroom?
* Why do I choose the teaching strategies/methods that I use?
* Why do I select particular assignments/experiences for my students?

Reality check from the other side of the desk

It is very easy to generate ideals for our teaching philosophies. But are they realistic? And do they really serve the needs of our students? In this activity, think about your experiences as a student and answer the following questions:

* What were my most positive learning experiences as a student? What made them so positive? List as many things as possible and be specific.
* Contrarily, what were my most negative learning experiences as a student? What made them so negative? List as many things as possible and be specific.

Review your responses as a student as well as your responses to other teaching philosophy exercises you have done (e.g., metaphor exercise). Which, if any, of the positive aspects have you built into your teaching and your ideas for your philosophy statement? Which, if any, of the negative aspects appear in your teaching and your ideas for your philosophy statement? Most importantly, what do you need to change or add in order to be more the kind of teacher that you appreciated as a student? How will you make those changes?

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