

# JONATHAN SARAGA

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## Developing and Implementing a Teaching Philosophy by Jonathan Saraga

As with any complex system, the health of the whole, and thus the health of its byproducts are dependent on the health of its individual components. Our system of education is no different, in that it requires that all of *its* components (students, faculty, administration, facilities, etc.) are functioning as efficiently as possible. In this way, the byproducts that are produced, (in this case young adults soon to assimilate into society), will have acquired the necessary skills and knowledge they need to reach their goals. A teaching philosophy can be a valuable tool for faculty in their process of helping students learn.

### THE STATEMENT

The first question we may have is, what is a statement of teaching philosophy, and why take the time to write a one? In today's economy, a business needs to find out as much as possible about a product before purchasing. It's for this reason that applicants for a faculty or graduate teaching assistant position are increasingly being asked to state their philosophy. In fact in some cases this request may be in conjunction with the submission of a teaching portfolio; the statement being a core component therein.

Whether we are seeking an academic position, promotion, tenure, or have been nominated for an award, the submission of a statement of teaching philosophy has become a necessity in order to even be considered. As Stephen Brookfield points out in his book *The Skillful Teacher*, "Teaching is about making some kind of dent in the world so that the world is different than it was before you practiced your craft. Knowing clearly what kind of dent you want to make in the world means that you must continually ask yourself the most fundamental evaluative questions of all - What effect am I having on students and on their learning?"

Aside from serving pedagogical purpose as a summative evaluation, the statement functions formatively as well. By documenting our teaching philosophy we have created a template that is ever-changing. As we experience, evolve, and change, so must our philosophy, as it is a projection of our *current* state, and our current level of understanding. In this way, we can continuously refine it, as *we*, ourselves continue to learn. Brookfield also comments on how the statement can serve a personal purpose, as a "...a distinctive organizing vision—a clear picture of why you are doing what you are doing that you can call up at points of crisis—is crucial to your personal sanity and morale."

Gail Goodyear and Douglas Allchin, in their study of the functions of a statement of teaching philosophy also identify a conclusive purpose: "In preparing a statement of teaching philosophy, professors assess and examine themselves to articulate the goals they wish to achieve in teaching.... A clear vision of a teaching philosophy provides stability, continuity, and long-term guidance... A well-defined philosophy can help them remain focused on their teaching goals and to appreciate the personal and professional rewards of teaching."

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## GETTING STARTED

We know what a teaching philosophy is, and what it is comprised of, but how do we begin constructing it? In order for the educational system as we know it to exist, students must be present. Even if robots eventually supersede humans as faculty, the human student would still remain, thus without them we would have no system. Therefore when developing our philosophy of teaching, it would make sense to begin by carefully examining *our* experience as a student, as we cannot successfully teach others about a subject matter without having learned about it ourselves, even if we were self-taught. Focusing initially on *our* learning process itself seems logical, considering that by understanding *our* function as learners, we might have a better chance of understanding others.

Developing the statement itself can be a very creative process as there is no required content or set format. There are many different approaches we can take, and of course, many formulations therein. However, regardless of the purpose of our statement or what is included, one thing is certain, we must supply evidence that we can implement our philosophy in the field; it does not exist in a vacuum. Even for personal reflection, it makes sense to have examples of experience listed for easy reference. When it comes to submitting the statement to search committees or for other evaluations, it is not possible in many cases for whoever is reading it to come to our class to actually watch us teach. By including very specific examples of teaching strategies, discussions, assignments, etc., we allow the reader to visualize what takes place in our classroom, and what the learning environment we create for our students is like.

In addition, if we can say the main goal of a teacher is to enhance the development of his student, we must realize that a student's development is not dependant on a teachers influence what so ever. We must be conscious of the fact that our philosophies only reflect what we perceive to be the most effective ways of teaching, however there is no guarantee it will be effective. However, at the same time, there is also no limit to the extent of which we can foster a student's growth in both the subject matter and as a being, no matter what the student's situation is upon meeting us. In general we hope to avoid situations where students are really not interested in the material, as they can potentially affect the experience of others around them negatively, but I digress. Perhaps if our students come away with a greater interest or appreciation for something, realized something about themselves, or grown in some way, we have done our job.

## CONTENT

Since there are no set requirements for the philosophy, I have formulated several self-reflective questions and other ideas to kick-start it's development. Of course, as with all the concepts, specific examples are needed as backing. First, we investigate the concepts of learning and teaching.

What *is* learning? What happens in a successful learning situation? What are our beliefs regarding learning theory and what specific strategies would we use? What are our values, beliefs, and aspirations as a teacher? What does an ideal teaching situation look like? Why do we consider it ideal? What is our role as a teacher? What skills should

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students obtain as the result of our teaching? What goals do we have for specific classes or curricula and what is the rationale behind them? What methods will we consider to reach these goals and objectives? Also, do we have any new ideas or strategies we have used or want to try?

We should also look at our interaction with students: What are our attitudes toward advising and mentoring students? How would an observer see us interact with students? Why do we want to work with students? How are the values and beliefs noted above realized in classroom activities? Example course materials, lesson plans, activities, assignments, assessment instruments, etc. can be useful. How will we assess student understanding? What are our beliefs about grading?

Last but certainly not least, we should reflect on our own growth: How will we continue growing as a teacher? What goals do we have for ourselves and how will we reach them? How have our attitudes toward teaching and learning changed over time? How will we use our student evaluations to improve our teaching? How might we learn new skills? How do we know when we have taught effectively?

Associate Professor of Mathematics at Ramapo College of New Jersey Katarzyna Potocka states in the opening statement of her teaching philosophy, “As a teacher, I have two primary goals: promoting the development of the students’ mathematics communication skills, and nurturing the students’ appreciation and enthusiasm for mathematics. Both of my teaching philosophy goals originate in the solid European educational background I received years ago. I believe I am capable of implementing these goals well, as teaching has always been an essential and one of the most enjoyable parts of my life.” What ever our reasons for teaching, or what our goals are, perhaps in order to implement our philosophy successfully we have to become better at teaching. Just as with any craft, skills take time to be acquired. We must allow our teaching abilities to develop, so that over time we may begin to truly realize and become the teacher we want to be.

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