



# WRITING A TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

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*On completion of this resource you should be able to:*

- Deliberate upon your conceptions of Teaching and Learning
- Analyse a range of teaching philosophy statements
- Prepare and elaborate an elementary teaching philosophy...

## Exploring Your Own Conceptions of Teaching and Learning<sup>1</sup>

A good teacher, like a good researcher, will always seek to extend the boundaries of their own knowledge. As teaching is an applied discipline, this also means extending the associated practical skills. Teaching, however, is also somewhat idiosyncratic in-as-much-as the personality of an individual teacher will influence how well they are able to use the proven tools of good teaching.

As *Biggs (2003: 6)* says,

"Wise and effective teaching is not...simply a matter of applying general principles of teaching according to rule; those principles need adapting to your own personal strengths and to your teaching context. A characteristic of award-winning university teachers is their willingness to collect student feedback on their teaching in order to see where their teaching might be improved (Dunkin and Precians 1992). Expert teachers continually reflect on how they might teach even better."

Brookfield (1995) points out that one of the hardest things for teachers to learn is that the sincerity of their intentions does not guarantee the effectiveness of their practice. Teaching always takes place in a social setting with all of the cultural, psychological and political complexities that complicate all human relationships (including those between students and teachers).

Brookfield goes on to warn against what he calls "teaching innocently" by which he means assuming that the meanings and significance that teachers place in their actions are the ones that students will take from them. Since we rarely, if ever, have a full awareness of how others perceive our actions - teaching in this way is naïve and potentially dangerous because it can lead to a misreading of what is happening in the classroom. Taking an uncritical stance towards teaching can result in teachers being either unaware of, or unable to change, the blocks to learning experienced by their students. On the other hand, becoming a critically reflective teacher, one who continually seeks to understand what students are going through and how they can be helped to maximize their potential, can enable teachers to be much more effective facilitators of learning.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ucdoer.ie/index.php/Exploring\\_Your\\_Own\\_Conceptions\\_of\\_Teaching\\_and\\_Learning](http://www.ucdoer.ie/index.php/Exploring_Your_Own_Conceptions_of_Teaching_and_Learning)

According to the McGraw Centre for Teaching and Learning at Princeton University<sup>2</sup>:

"Developing a teaching philosophy statement allows you to reflect on and articulate your beliefs and practices as a teacher. The most meaningful statements of teaching philosophy identify sophisticated goals for teaching and describe varied methods for meeting them. They consider the relationship between teaching content and teaching skills and demonstrate an understanding of student learning. At their best, they are intellectually revealing; rather than simply describe your teaching experience, they demonstrate how you think about your teaching."

## An Introduction to Academic Reflective Practice

Learning new techniques for teaching is like the fish that provides a meal today;  
reflective practice is the net that provides meals for the rest of your life.

(Biggs & Tang, 2007, p.43)

Reflective practice can be more formally encouraged and directed as action research (Kember & Kelly, 1993). Action research involves systematically changing your teaching using 'on the ground' evidence that suggests the changes you make are in the right direction and enhancing student learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007). The target of action research is the teacher, not the change that's being implemented.

In action research, the term 'reflection' is considered misleading. Transformative reflection (Brockbank & McGill, 2000) suggests that teaching is being altered as a result of the reflection and is deemed more accurate. Engaging in action research to improve teaching practice however involves a more explicit theory of teaching (Biggs & Tang, 2007).

While many teachers have an implicit theory of teaching there is a need for a more consciously worked-out theory that generates answers to teaching problems. This helps to rephrases the unhelpful and not very useful 'there's something wrong with my teaching' to the more manageable and approachable 'students are only regurgitating what I give to them in class'. The latter also brings it back to the teaching, not the students, and allows the problem to be framed in a way that can be addressed by the teacher.

<sup>2</sup> <https://mcgraw.princeton.edu/node/1486>

## TASK: WHAT IS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE?

Review these two definitions of reflective practice, and prepare one of the following:

1. Complete the following sentence, "I prefer the 1<sup>st</sup> / 2<sup>nd</sup> definition because...

OR

2. Give your own definition of reflective practice

OR

3. Complete the sentence, "For me, the most important feature of reflective practice is....".

### *Definition 1:*

"In reflective practice, practitioners engage in a continuous cycle of self-observation and self-evaluation in order to understand their own actions and the reactions they prompt in themselves and in learners (Brookfield, 1995; Thiel, 1999). The goal is not necessarily to address a specific problem or question defined at the outset, as in practitioner research, but to observe and refine practice in general on an ongoing basis."

(Cunningham 2001).<sup>3</sup>

### *Definition 2:*

"...critical reflection entails a challenge to the hidden assumptions of both the reflector and those of the surrounding social context. Critical reflection goes beyond mere reflection, which could be simply a review of actions in the light of accepted precepts, in that it requires the reflector to "deconstruct long-held habits of behaviour by looking beyond the behaviour itself to their own self-image and examining why they do what they do".

(Silverman & Casazza 2000: 239).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Cunningham M (2001) Reflective Teaching Practice in Adult ESL Settings Eric Digest March 2001 EDO-LE-01-01 US National Centre for ESL Literacy Education Available at <http://www.cal.org/nclle/digests/reflect.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Silverman S & Casazza M (2000) Learning & Development: Making Connections to Enhance Teaching San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

## Two Frameworks to Promote Reflection

### Model of Experiential Learning: Kolb's (1984)

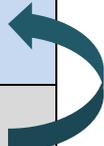
This model is based directly on Kolb's experiential learning cycle where active experimentation leads to a transfer of learning from current cycle to a new cycle. There are four main components to the cycle, and the individual can enter the model at any one of these points.

<b>Concrete Experience</b>	This relates to the incident or event prompting the reflection and involves the physical act of being involved in or having hands-on experience. Although in theory you can enter the model at any stage this tends to be the main point of entry.
<b>Reflective Observation</b>	After the event comes the initial reflection.  This entails stepping back and viewing the event or incident from an objective perspective. This should provide some insight into what you did and why you did it.
<b>Abstract Conceptualization</b>	These initial reflections are then explored in greater detail. Conceptualisation involves interpreting events and actions, looking for connections between these, and the process of applying some theoretical premise to understand events.
<b>Active Experimentation</b>	Once this deeper understanding has been established the individual translates it into predictions about what is likely to happen next or what actions should be taken to refine the way similar events may be handled in future.

### Reflective Cycle: Gibbs (1998)

This model encourages the practitioner to think about different aspects of a given situation or event, to evaluate it, and establish an action plan for dealing with such a scenario should it arise again. It helps the individual to consider how they think and respond within a given and provides insight into self and practice (Johns, 2005).

<p><b>Description:</b></p> <p>What happened?</p>	<p>Describe in detail the event you are reflecting on.</p> <p>Include e.g. where were you; who else was there; why were you there; what were you doing; what were other people doing; what was the context of the event; what happened; what was your part in this; what parts did the other people play; what was the result</p>
<p><b>Feelings:</b></p> <p>What were you thinking and feeling?</p>	<p>At this stage, try to recall and explore those things that were going on inside your head. Include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– How you were feeling when the event started?</li> <li>– What you were thinking about at the time?</li> <li>– How did it make you feel?</li> <li>– How did other people make you feel?</li> <li>– How did you feel about the outcome of the event?</li> <li>– What do you think about it now?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Evaluation:</b></p> <p>What was good and bad about the experience?</p>	<p>Try to evaluate or make a judgement about what has happened. Consider what was good about the experience and what was bad about the experience or what did or didn't go so well</p>
<p><b>Analysis:</b></p> <p>What sense can you make of the situation?</p>	<p>Break the event down into its component parts so they can be explored separately. You may need to ask more detailed questions about the answers to the last stage.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What went well?</li> <li>– What did you do well?</li> <li>– What did others do well?</li> <li>– What went wrong or did not turn out how it should have done?</li> <li>– In what way did you or others contribute to this?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Conclusion:</b></p> <p>What else could you have done?</p>	<p>This differs from the evaluation stage in that now you have explored the issue from different angles and have a lot of information to base your judgement. It is here that you are likely to develop insight into you own and other people's behaviour in terms of how they contributed to the outcome of the event.</p> <p>Remember the purpose of reflection is to learn from an experience. Without detailed analysis and honest exploration that occurs during all the previous stages, it is unlikely that all aspects of the event will be taken into account and therefore valuable opportunities for learning can be missed. During this stage, you should ask yourself what you could have done differently</p>
<p><b>Action plan:</b></p> <p>If it arose again what would you do?</p>	<p>During this stage you should think yourself forward into encountering the event again and to plan what you would do – would you act differently, or would you be likely to do the same?</p>



Here the cycle is tentatively completed and suggests that should the event occur again it will be the focus of another reflective cycle.

## Task: Teaching Philosophy First Steps

Take a moment to complete the following statements....

- My main goal as a teacher of ..... is to .....

- The relationship I try to achieve with my students is.....

- The most important thing that I expect of my students is.....

- I know a teaching session has been successful when.....

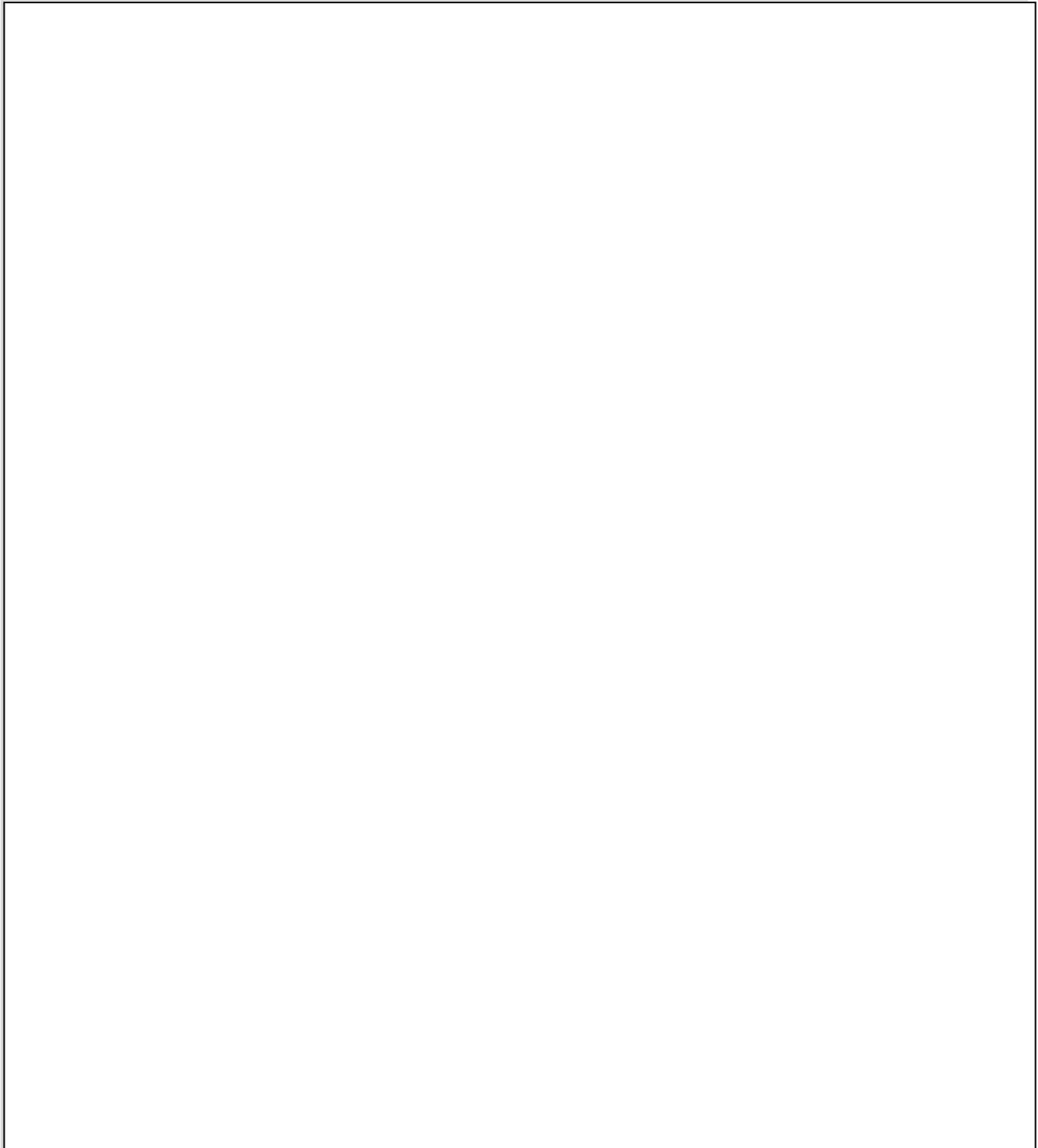
- The values that I seek to impart to my students are.....

- Effective teaching is .....

## Task: Teaching Philosophy Take Two

Having appraised a number of philosophies, and referring to your previous 'writing task'; use those statements and select and combine as many as you wish to create a framework draft philosophy, and then begin to fill in the gaps...

### Philosophy Draft:

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the student to write their philosophy draft. The box is currently blank.

Notes:

*End of Workbook*