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The growing importance of Teaching Philosophy Statements and what they mean for the future: Why Teaching Philosophy Statements will affect you

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This article explores the growing importance of Teaching Philosophy Statements (TPS) as a tool to positively impact teaching styles and methods. The changing landscape of teaching at the college level is addressed with an emphasis on the growing importance of accountability. How new and senior faculty are affected by the TPS is considered as well as the approach that should be taken in writing a TPS. The benefits of having a TPS are discussed as are the fears faculty may have of something that seems so benign at face value. Finally, a brief recommendation is posited on the best way to introduce TPS to faculty in a non-threatening way.

Introduction

There is no denying that evaluations and outcomes have permeated every aspect of professional life. The constant measurement and search for increased efficiency to maximize outcomes lie at the core of all business models (Melitski & Manoharan, 2014; Dwyer, 2007; Reid, 1999). Academia is now succumbing to this wave of constant self-evaluation and evaluation of others by way of the Teaching Philosophy Statement (TPS). While tenure track faculty are constantly scrutinized in terms of research output and teaching evaluations, tenured faculty are also becoming familiar with the increased expectations of universities and colleges that they continue to be academically qualified, accountable for learning, and open to post-tenure review (Robinson, Franklin, & Novecevic, 2012). While this can be daunting for some faculty who feel their academic freedom is threatened, the TPS can actually serve as an ally in keeping an individual academically viable if and when their performance is reviewed. This article illustrates how TPS are becoming required and will be a mainstay within a few short years and what that means for not only new faculty but also senior faculty who went through the tenure process many years previous and are now hearing the term 'post-tenure review'. This author therefore seeks to convey how a TPS can serve as a mentor to faculty.

Who is Affected by Teaching Philosophy Statements?

Increasingly, applicants for vacant teaching positions must also provide a TPS. While at first glance it seems very informative to have a statement outlining the kind of teacher one aspires to be it must be noted that many junior faculty have little to no teaching experience.

Quite often the only barometer they have in assessing the type of teacher they would like to be lies in past experiences of previous professors (Leger & Young, 2014; Reid, 2009; Worley, 2001). They have excelled in the area of research in the attainment of their doctoral degrees, which proves only that they can conduct or understand research output, but tells us nothing about their skill as a classroom facilitator (Taylor, 2004). Hence, the result is a well-written statement which glowingly describes their view of the ideal teacher whereas the reality may be the contrary. And in the hands of highly discerning faculty on hiring committees the TPS may actually be counter productive in the pursuit of employment.

With regard to senior faculty, any attempt to monitor teaching with the intent to exercise accountability could be regarded as quite threatening. Indeed such faculty may seek union advisement if the TPS is perceived as a tool of measurement and accountability tied to salary increases and conditions of work. In addition, the introduction of post-tenure review might also necessitate the inspection of one's TPS. Additional points of concern

might be the necessity of not only having a TPS but adherence to it for promotion consideration. So, regardless of whether one is beginning a career in academia, is mid career or late career, all have either heard of or have already been impacted by the TPS.

How to Approach Teaching Philosophy Statement Development

The TPS is a written statement of one's approach to teaching and outlines a plan for future development of teaching style and methods. As there is already an abundance of information on how to write a TPS and items to include and exclude, this article addresses what should guide and direct an individual in approaching the construction of their TPS. To this end three focus areas are posited- 'who', 'where', and 'how' which act as foundational pillars of a TPS. Of immediate importance is to fully understand 'who' is being taught – what are their abilities, prior subject matter knowledge, and what their expectations are for learning. Insight into this information can be garnered from a sound understanding of the institution itself 'where' students are enrolled– mission, values, student demographics, departmental expectations, etc. From here, an assessment can be made of the material which can or cannot be covered in a course in terms of difficulty level and volume. Finally, we consider 'how' to present the desired material in a form which can be understood and assimilated by the student population. One is now in a position to self-assess one's teaching and make an evaluation of where development is needed. This lies at the heart of the TPS - a commitment to developing one's teaching with a focus on the future.

What begins to emerge is the understanding of the gaps in our teaching skill-set and the need to address these gaps so as to increase the quality of learning taking place in the classroom. The three pillars previously mentioned now begin to hold up a theme of teaching which is designed to improve the quality of delivery in an effort to return increased learning and understanding by the student.

Finally, this emergent theme then illuminates the future direction that teaching should take in the pursuit of new styles and methods of teaching. So, the TPS addresses the learning landscape by identifying best practices in teaching which may suit a faculty's teaching approach and then identifies areas for improvement. A TPS which does not highlight where teaching should go is therefore not directive, and indeed invalid.

Of importance is to note that a TPS does not fundamentally change a faculty's teaching approach but rather serves as a silent mentor guiding faculty towards continuous improvement.

Ramification of having a Teaching Philosophy Statement

Regardless of the career point of an individual the TPS in an invaluable teaching assistant. It is the mission statement of a faculty member which declares where they would like their teaching to go and in doing so helps to keep faculty motivated and committed to constant improvement. Better teaching results in greater learning which in turn provides a return to the faculty member by way of increased job satisfaction. This is then a cyclical process of improvement and therein lies the value of developing a TPS. While every great idea has its pitfalls it's the absence of perfection that fuels the pursuit of continuous improvement.

While the scholarship of teaching and learning is a relatively new area of research (Boyer, 1990) and andragogy likewise is a new pathway of research (Akande & Jegede, 2004) both work together in framing the need for better ways of understanding student populations and improving teaching. The increased scrutiny on the cost and return of a college degree has necessitated this focus on the quality of college teaching and its relatedness to industry needs (Mahopatra, 2012). Consequently, we will see more attention to classroom performance across all disciplines and without university support through teaching development offerings at Centers for Teaching and Learning many university administrations will find it difficult to implement required standards of teaching (O'Malley & Fleming, 2012; Robinson, 2012). Therefore what we may see is an era of required teacher training beginning with the TPS development.

Conclusion

While there is no denying that having a TPS is a positive step in teaching development while also keeping one honest with themselves as to why they teach, there is also no denying as to the many different ways in which a TPS may be perceived by both senior faculty and university administrators (Hubball & Robertson, 2004). If the perception exists that TPS development is agenda laden then an opportunity may be lost to deliver what lies at the heart of its purpose – better teaching which benefits students.

This author proposes that TPS introduction be done voluntarily at departmental levels which in turn may appease any fears faculty may have as to the purpose of post-tenure reviews (Gray, Lawson, Margaret, & Joan, 2005). It would also serve as mainstay activity for all faculty because as newer hires progress throughout their careers the result would be a full complement of

departmental faculty who have written a TPS and are not frightened by its purpose.

Overtime, a TPS-compliant faculty may then more freely engage teaching seminars and workshops without fear of intimidation and without entertaining thoughts of such issues not being in collective bargaining contracts and without threatening litigation. After all, what does a good teacher have to fear?

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