



Constructing a teaching philosophy: Aligning beliefs, theories, and practice



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ABSTRACT

Crafting a teaching philosophy is required at several junctures in the careers of nursing faculty. This article presents a 4-step model for constructing a teaching philosophy composed of (a) aligning educational concepts, (b) building a framework for educational practice, (c) constructing a draft, and (d) reviewing and interpreting the teaching philosophy. The model guides nursing faculty to incorporate their organization's mission, personal beliefs, and educational theories into their teaching practice through their teaching philosophy.

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Introduction

At several points in nursing faculty's career, there is an expectation that they will have developed a document that states their personal beliefs and ideas about students' learning and teaching practice. This statement is commonly referred to as a *teaching philosophy* and may be part of an initial application for an academic position along with a curriculum vitae and cover letter. For nursing faculty who have already gained employment in the academy, the teaching philosophy may be requested as part of an annual portfolio. The reflection of one's teaching philosophy in one's practice may also be considered when applying for a promotion or moving to a different institution.

To construct a strong teaching philosophy, it is important to articulate one's beliefs about the process of teaching and learning and to become aware of the nuances of key phrases and well-worded concepts that will serve as the bedrock of a career in education. Viewing this task as a serious responsibility highlights the educator's sincere commitment to teaching. Developing a teaching philosophy may be a totally new experience for novice nursing faculty entering the academic setting from a background of clinical practice, research, or administration. Educators, with strong pedagogical background may have already written an initial teaching philosophy as a course

assignment; however, these will often still need revision and refinement to meet the expectations of actual hiring committees and faculty administrators.

The purpose of this article is to present a four-step model for the process of constructing a teaching philosophy. The first step is to gather information about the educational institution, department, and position in order to select educational concepts for inclusion and alignment within the teaching philosophy. The second step is to ask and answer reflective questions about one's beliefs, likes, and expectations regarding teaching and learning. The third step is to construct a draft document, and the fourth step is to subject it to peer review. Subsequently, it is the educator's purview to revise and rewrite the content until he or she reaches a product that resonates comfortably with his or her professional identity. These steps are presented in Fig. 1 below.

Step 1: Aligning Educational Concepts

Constructing a teaching philosophy starts with identifying educational concepts that should be reflected upon and incorporated in one's statement based on available information about the higher education organization. Is it a private, faith-based, or state school? Is it a for-profit or not-for-profit organization? What are its vision and mission? In particular, how does the mission describe the purpose of the organization, who is served, and how or where is this service delivered? What are the key terms and considerations used within the organization to conceptualize its work and inspire its members? What are the key inspirational words used to motivate members of the organization to create a better future? Understanding the nature of the target organization is critical to constructing a teaching philosophy

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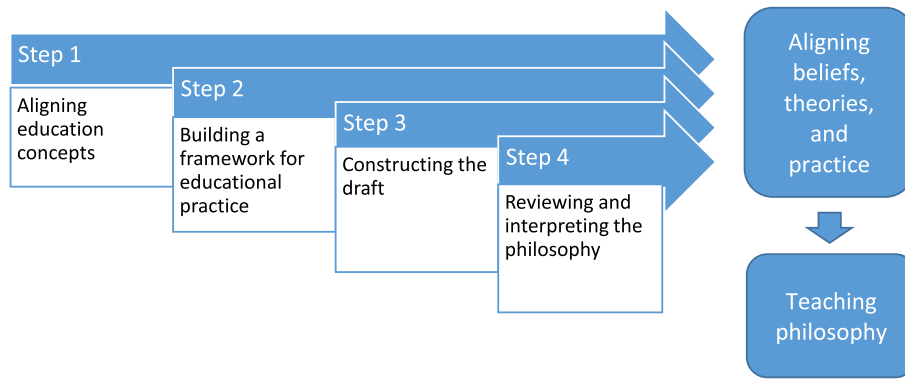


Fig. 1. The four-step model in constructing a teaching philosophy.

that reflects the organization's intrinsic values; if the college is primarily a teaching institution, then teaching excellence and student success will be the most important factors for contributing to its academic culture, whereas if it is research intensive, then conducting influential research and securing external funding will be the drivers of professional success.

Organizational values may be boldly stated or vaguely implied. This information may be located on or inferred from the institution's website, recruitment flyers, and advertisements. Exploring these sources of information, the educator can develop a sense of what is important to this organization and how it is pursued and expressed in individual academic units. It is important that key terms be gleaned from the university's vision and mission and that the educator's teaching philosophy be in concert with them, probably explicitly mentioning them. Global perspective, culturally sensitive, evidence-based practice, student-centered learning, lifelong learning, family-centered care, technology skills, and interprofessional collaboration are common concepts included in the missions of a variety of higher education institutions.

Moving from the organizational level to the department level, it should be identified if the department has the same or distinct/additional values compared with the organization. Each academic department will have a dedicated section on the university website or a program description in the program catalog, student and faculty handbooks, or similar documents that provide expectations and proposed timelines for teaching, research, and service. Another source of key educational concepts will be the target organizational and student-level learning outcomes. If additional information is needed, interviewing a faculty member in the target department may also be a rich source of information. There may even be an existing department philosophy that collectively defines teaching and learning. Accreditation self-studies will also indicate student populations, the curriculum conceptual model, and methods of delivery. Admission standards, student support provisions and culture, and types of students enrolled in a program are other factors that might be reflected in a philosophy of teaching.

Step 2: Building a Framework for Educational Practice

After identifying important concepts to consider in aligning one's teaching philosophy with the mission of a given higher education organization, as in Step 1, a framework for one's teaching practice should be developed. Such a framework guides the educator's teaching journey by providing principles for curriculum, instruction, classroom management, and evaluation. Developing such a framework requires one to explore one's personal beliefs about education, identify favorite educational theories that share core educational concepts

with one's beliefs, and discuss how to apply these theories to educational practice while considering personal teaching style.

As suggested, this step starts with self-reflection on one's personal beliefs, values, and expectations about education. What is learning? How do students learn? What are students' roles in their learning process? What is the role of educators in facilitating student learning? How are students motivated to learn? By answering these questions, key elements of personal educational values and beliefs can be identified and can then serve as a stepping stone to develop approaches promoting students' learning, discuss rationales for educational methods and, by extension, promote continuity with other professional roles, such as service and research. Self-reflection also helps an educator explore his or her values and belief about what kind of teaching practice is suitable for his or her temperament and style and will engender educational effectiveness. In this exploration of personal values, beliefs, and concepts, the key terms gleaned from the higher education organization's mission, vision, and other materials should also be considered to ensure that the educator's philosophy is well aligned with them. At this point, formal or explicit writing about the core concepts of one's personal values and belief is not necessary; however, creating a concept map or simple figure describing these ideas can help visually to organize them and place concepts discovered by self-reflection in terms of the organization's mission and vision.

Based on these personal beliefs, values, and core concepts about teaching and learning, an educator then needs to find favorite educational theories that have a common thread in terms of the beliefs and values espoused. Teaching and learning theories provide frameworks explaining the roles of students and faculty in the learning process, how students' learning is promoted, and how to determine if learning occurs, with rationales. Therefore, it is important for one's abstract theoretical framework to match one's intuitive core concepts with the educator.

There are a range of available resources about educational theories. The book titled *Teaching in Nursing: A Guide for Faculty* (Billings & Halstead, 2015) provides information about teaching and learning theories and guidance on how to incorporate the principles of these theories into teaching practice. The Center for Research on Learning and Teaching at the University of Michigan (2016) provides information and hyperlinks to other online resources about learning theories on its website, and there are of course a range of other materials online of varying levels of quality. To evaluate these, and theories in general, one should try to identify the core concepts of the theories and their links and similarities to personal core concepts. It is probably best to use only one to two theories in a teaching philosophy, in order to achieve a unified teaching approach with consistent logical flow.

A teaching philosophy covers not only conceptual ideas regarding learning and teaching but also practical aspects, such as general

Table 1
Guidelines for writing a teaching philosophy

Questions to consider		
	Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What has motivated you to be an educator? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Display desire and commitment without being phony. ● What are your beliefs in teaching and learning? ● What are roles of the teacher and roles of the student in the educator's disciplines? ● What is the relationship between educator and student?
	Main body	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What theories can provide a framework for teaching practice? ● How do educational methods incorporate with the theories to achieve learning in the classroom? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Give specific examples of theories and educational methods. ● What are methods that are used for clinical instruction? ● How do you approach student assessment in the discipline? ● What types of outcomes do you want for students?
	Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How will you determine your teaching effectiveness? ● How are you committed to lifelong learning and self-improvement?

educational methods, clinical teaching methods, relationships with students, and functions of these methods and relationships in educational practice (Felicilda-Reynaldo & Utley, 2015). As personal beliefs and values are integrated with the theories, methods of learning, teaching, and evaluation can be actualized for practice, with appropriate rationales. For example, Malcolm Knowles's adult learning theory suggests appropriate teaching approaches for an educator who believes that students are the main agent in their learning process and that learning occurs in the inner self of college students as driven by the interaction between themselves and their environment. Knowles's theory posits that adults are self-directed, need to know why they need to learn, use this experience as a source of learning, and are motivated by a life-centered orientation (Knowles, Elwood, & Swanson, 1998). The following example of part of a teaching philosophy verbally formulates this integration of the theory and practice:

Each student has different experiences accumulated, and these affect the formation of their cognitive thinking patterns and preferred learning styles. Therefore, nursing faculty need to respect students' own experiences and learning styles and then consider these as they develop the appropriate teaching methods. A variety of educational activities, such as discussions, group projects, and case studies, as well as lectures with pictures, schematics, and graphs, should be used. In addition, simulations, role playing, and case-based lectures can be used, because college students prefer a life-, task-, and problem-centered orientation for learning. Students should be allowed to create their own projects while key lessons are provided by teachers to help these students enhance their self-directed learning ability. Doing so also helps them develop their research and analysis skills. Furthermore, learning outcomes, educational activities, assignments, and exams should be designed in such a way to help students become aware of their needs and current level of learning. Standardized tests and simulations can also be used as diagnostic assessments to provide remediation.

Nursing faculty guide students in their self-discovery journey and inspire them to realize their learning desires. In this regard, establishing supportive partnerships with students is important through the creation of a friendly environment and extending assistance to students outside the classroom. Nursing faculty can then earn respect and trust of students, who perceive them as both a resource and a facilitator.

Educators expected to teach both on campus, in the traditional face-to-face model and in online, should include in their teaching philosophy consideration of the respective readiness and needs of these delivery methods. Remediation for content mastery or individual tutoring during office hours may also be a vital part of the educator's

role and highlighted in the educator's teaching philosophy. In addition, critical thinking, lifelong learning, and quality of care are themes that are frequently included in nursing faculty's statements of teaching philosophy (Felicilda-Reynaldo & Utley, 2015). The value of these themes in nursing education and how to promote them should be discussed in the theoretical framework. As brainstorming to identify core concepts of personal beliefs and theories, recognition of relationships among them and between them and theories, and generation of ideas for teaching approaches concludes, one is ready to construct a draft philosophy.

Step 3: Constructing the Draft

Before starting the writing process, it is helpful to search for information on "developing a teaching philosophy" on university websites or elsewhere online. These sites may include examples from various disciplines and sample checklists to guide the construction of your draft—practical tools that can complement the framework here. Table 1 provides a practical tool for writing a teaching philosophy.

As in many writing assignments, it is helpful to start with an outline. Its total length should be a maximum of one to two pages, and it is best to use a 12-point font for ease of reading and to double-space. Unlike some scholarly writing, the statement is written in the active voice and in the first person (with the use of "I" statements), and coming across as genuine, positive, and humble is important. The first paragraph should describe what stimulated the educator's initial interest in teaching and lay out his or her beliefs about the roles and responsibilities of the educator in helping students learn, reflecting the values of the academic institution. An introduction may start with a self-reflection, such as the following:

My earliest memories of wanting to be a teacher started with my 8th-grade science project about the circulation of the human heart. I was thrilled when my classmates understood the concepts for the first time.

It is important to relate this reflection to the organizational values. For example, the mission statement of Kent State University is "We transform lives and communities through the power of discovery, learning and creative expression in an inclusive environment" (2017). The key terms that can be derived from the mission include the value of education that transforms students, the importance of community partnerships, the high value of research, the emphasis on the outcome of student learning, and the creation of an environment welcoming to all. These key terms should be incorporated in the introduction to the teaching philosophy statement, as in the following example:

Establishing trust with the student is a vital first step in setting a tone that is open and accepting of diverse ideas and unique individuals. The process of teaching and learning opens a student to viewing the world from different perspectives and imagining new possibilities. This knowledge can then be applied in community settings to improve the quality of life for others.

The following shows how belief statements can include key terms and achieve organizational alignment:

- *I believe in interprofessional learning and reflection that motivates students to communicate effectively and to work together in teams.*
- *I believe in implementing clinical reasoning that is grounded in current evidence-based practice and that is adaptive to the patient's preferences.*
- *I believe in lifelong learning that focuses on continual improvement based on best practices for classroom and online teaching, research, nursing, and community engagement.*

The second paragraph can then describe why and how these responsibilities are fulfilled and includes examples of the educator's theoretical underpinnings, approaches, and methods.

In nursing programs, students need to develop certain competencies that are required, so that they can provide excellent nursing care to patients with complex health problems in various clinical situations and ever-changing healthcare environments. This goal can be accomplished not only by gaining knowledge and skills but also by developing critical thinking, which is the thought process involved in problem-solving and decision-making. Malcolm Knowles's adult learning theory states that students' characteristics, learning styles, experiences, motivations, and self-direction should be considered in the teaching and learning processes to help learners develop critical thinking. Although students' knowledge foundation is provided by educators, learning does not occur if students themselves do not accept and use the new knowledge. Nursing faculty should be learning facilitators rather than knowledge givers, so they can guide students in determining their learning needs and in taking responsibility for their learning. For this, student-centered educational strategies should be used to encourage students to engage in their own learning actively. Guiding students to identify their learning styles and to utilize proper learning ways through their learning experiences with teachers is important. Doing so also helps nursing students transition from being dependent to self-directed learners for lifelong learning, which is indispensable for registered nurses because they need to be constantly updated on new evidence and technologies and thus be able to adjust to ever-changing environments.

Finally, in the last section of the statement, one should describe how one will continually improve one's teaching practice, incorporating current educational research, student evaluations, peer evaluations, and consultations with a mentor or mentors:

As a nursing instructor, I need to keep exploring learning philosophies updating my educational philosophy, develop effective evidence-based educational strategies, utilize peer and student evaluations to improve my teaching, and engage in scholarship to enhance students' learning and hone their critical thinking. As a result, students [will be able to] develop their nursing competencies, and the nursing program can produce qualified graduates who are ready for the National Council Licensure Examination-Registered Nurse (NCLEX-RN) success.

Step 4: Reviewing and Interpreting the Teaching Philosophy

After an initial draft of the statement is completed, it should be reviewed, in multiple ways. Comparing the statement to similar examples successfully submitted to the potential department or from the same discipline is one way. This helps to ensure that the draft teaching philosophy contains the essential components reflecting specific concepts or standards required in the department or discipline. In addition, peers or colleagues may be consulted to examine the draft and give constructive feedback. Rubrics or guidelines can be offered with the draft for evaluating tone, structure, writing style, and content. This also helps assure an objective critique by providing structure and needed critical distance (Center for Educational Innovation, 2015). Examples of rubrics are searchable online; however, one may also create one's own to ensure that the statement is evaluated appropriately, if its elements are effective and serve the desired purpose, and if it is generally pertinent to the specialty (Center for Educational Innovation, 2015).

For faculty who are currently teaching, formal evaluation of a teaching philosophy may be incorporated as part of the in-classroom teaching evaluation or by informal self-reflection during the course. As part of this evaluation, the educator must assess desired outcomes related to specific statements in the philosophy itself. Seasoned educators may self-evaluate a teaching philosophy many times over the course of a career (McDaniel, 1999; Owens, Miller, & Grise-Owens, 2014). As time passes, self-reflection may be more common than formal evaluation as the educator evolves and goals change. A new educational theory may motivate change in one's teaching approach, or a department accreditation self-study may shift a conceptual model espoused by the department that then alters one's beliefs about teaching.

Conclusion

One's teaching philosophy should be a living document that is integrated in and actualized by the art and science of one's teaching. This requires constant effort to update one's philosophy to match with one's development as an educator, the organization's goals, students' needs, the insights of new research, and current educational trends. The model for constructing a teaching philosophy presented here is intended to help guide nursing faculty in their teaching journey and advance them toward achievement of their professional goals. The four steps of the model are interrelated to ensure that the philosophy captures and reflects core concepts and essential factors that influence the teaching profession. Using this model, educators can construct a compelling and inspiring teaching philosophy aligning personal beliefs, organizational mission, and teaching practice on a strong theoretical basis.

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