Using a Student-Directed Teaching Philosophy Statement to Assess and Improve One's Teaching

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Faculty members traditionally develop a teaching philosophy statement (TPS) as part of the job application process, for tenure reviews, or to encourage reflection. In this paper, we propose an alternative approach — to develop the TPS with students as the primary target audience, distribute it to students at the beginning of a course, and collect evaluative data from students about its accuracy at the end of the course. Data are reported from three faculty members who used this student-directed TPS approach. We present implications for faculty development and for the creation and use of teaching philosophies.

The creation of a teaching philosophy statement (TPS) has become a critical element in the preparation for success in academic careers. Generally speaking, a TPS is designed to provide a clear rationale and articulation of a teacher's approach to teaching and learning, tie that "philosophy" to relevant theory and research, and illustrate how it is implemented in one's classroom. There is a well-developed literature on the development and use of these statements (e.g., Chism, 1998; O'Neal, Meizlish, & Kaplan, 2007; Schönwetter, Sokal, Friesen, & Taylor, 2002). This literature specifies several potential TPS purposes: (1) as a supporting document when applying for an academic position (O'Neal et al., 2007), (2) as supplementary material when applying for promotion and tenure (Lang, 2010), (3) as a means to engage in reflection upon one's teaching (Eierman, 2008), and (4) in special circumstances such when applying for a teaching-related grant or in support of a teaching award nomination (Schönwetter et al., 2002).

There are several noteworthy aspects of these traditional TPS uses. First, most of them are summative in nature, applying to administrative decision-making contexts. Second, all of them focus on a discrete event or activity. Essentially, once a person has written a TPS to serve one of these purposes, it has served its usefulness and can be set aside until another similar need emerges in the near or distant future. A final noteworthy aspect of this list is that it excludes as an audience or source of feedback the major target for one's teaching—the students in one's classes. As such, the potential usefulness of the TPS as a developmental tool for faculty is limited.

Guidelines for creating an effective and accurate TPS abound. For example, in their conceptual model,

Schönwetter et al. (2002) noted that a TPS should clarify and provide a rationale for good teaching, guide teaching behaviors and the evaluation of them, promote personal and professional development, and help disseminate effective teaching practices at one's institution. Kaplan, Meizlish, O'Neal, and Wright (2008) developed a research-based rubric for the creation of a TPS. Chism (1998) discussed the inclusion of an illustrative metaphor that is tied to one's discipline. Best practice recommendations (e.g., Eierman, 2008; Schönwetter et al., 2002) also include connecting the statement's content with supporting documentation, such as one's CV, letters of recommendation, or teaching evaluations. A good deal of attention has also been devoted to TPS training, particularly for students in graduate programs (e.g., Kearns & Sullivan, 2010; Schussler et al., 2011).

In summary, the TPS serves several traditional purposes. The literature provides useful guidelines for the development and revision of one's TPS. However, these purposes and guidelines are limited in terms of their implications for faculty development.

An Additional Use of the TPS

Given its traditional uses, the TPS is in danger of becoming standardized, consisting of a teaching philosophy boilerplate that reflects what faculty think their hiring or tenure and promotion committees want to see (cf. Pratt, 2005, Kaplan et al., 2008). In addition, there are few checks on the accuracy of one's TPS. In our experience, hiring or tenure and promotion committes have little interest in, or incentive for, checking the accuracy of what applicants write in their statements. In

fact, research indicates that hiring committees do not find these statements particularly effective or useful (e.g., Meizlish & Kaplan, 2008).

Whereas best practice recommendations (e.g., Eierman, 2008) advocate for the inclusion of supporting documentation, it is difficult to determine the accuracy or honesty of the contents of a TPS, even if such documentation is available. Korn (2012) suggests that teachers revisit their TPS once they have been teaching a particular course for a few weeks and assess whether they are following their stated practices (see also Korn & Sikorski, 2010). Some recommendations suggest that a TPS is shared with and reviewed by one's peers (Korn, 2012; Schönwetter et al., 2002). However, one's peers typically do not take courses from the teacher and may not have a comprehensive view of the course. Therefore, they may lack the experiences of that teacher's students. In addition, peers often do not have clear criteria with which to evaluate a TPS (Schönwetter et al., 2002).

Whereas writing a TPS can be a valuable tool for reflection, that use is limited if teachers do not collect data as to the accuracy of their practices and their reflections about those practices. To complement the traditional uses of a TPS, we propose that such statements should be developed in order to be shared with and evaluated by one's students. Feedback from students who have experienced the teacher in a face-to-face, hybrid, or online classroom can help that teacher assess the degree that the TPS meets its traditional purposes and uses. Further, a student-directed TPS can serve equally well for these other purposes. That is, we propose that this kind of TPS would be appropriate to use when applying for a job, submitting promotion and tenure materials, or applying for a teaching grant or award.

Surprisingly, there is very little discussion of the use of a student-directed TPS in the literature. Schönwetter et al. (2002) noted that providing students with one's TPS can help them to understand the teacher's approach and expectations for their learning, as well as increase their feelings of control over their learning with that teacher. However, these authors do not advocate for the creation of a TPS that is developed with one's students as the primary audience or for the collection of data from students as to the veridicality of one's TPS.

For the current project, we recruited teachers to create a student-directed TPS and to collect data from their students at the end of the term evaluating that TPS. Because the teachers used in this study had extensive teaching experience, we expected that their TPSs would be rated as highly accurate by their students. On the other hand, because they wrote their statements for this particular project, there might be elements of those statements that did not accurately reflect the actual be- haviors of the teachers. In addition to examining student ratings of their teacher's TPS, we illustrate some of the ways that a student-directed TPS can be used for faculty development.

Method

Participants

One hundred and eighty-eight undergraduate and graduate students (100 women, 85 men, 3 missing) from a large (26,000+) southeastern U.S. public university participated in the study. Students came from multiple sections of undergraduate English Composition ($n = 77$) and Public Speaking ($n = 102$) courses as well as from a graduate-level Theories of Personality Psychology course ($n = 9$). All of the courses were small and face-to-face, with enrollments between 9 and 25 students. Three different teachers taught these courses. Most of the students in the undergraduate courses were sophomores (57%) and the majority of the sample reported that this was the first time they had their teacher in a class (96%). Students received no incentives or course credits for their participation.

Measures and Procedure

Prior to the beginning of the semester, the three teachers created their TPS in ways that were consistent with the approach described earlier in this paper. In particular, they followed best practices for TPS content (e.g., writing in the first person, using nontechnical language) and kept the statements relatively brief (1-2 pages). Most importantly, they directed their statements to their students as the primary audience (e.g., using "you" rather than "my students") and attempting to create a dialogue with the reader as a student in one's course. The teachers had extensive experience, averaging 16 years of teaching in higher education.

Students completed an instructor teaching philosophy research survey, developed specifically for this study. Instructions indicated that their teachers had written a TPS that "is supposed to provide a clear and concise description of an instructor's teaching approach, methods, experience, and expertise." Instructions informed students that there has been very little research on whether such statements accurately reflect how a person teaches and what a teacher actually does in his or her classes. The described purpose of the study was to assess the accuracy of their teacher's TPS.

The survey consisted of four steps. In Step 1, students read their teacher's TPS. Instructions directed them to read it carefully and to try to get a clear understanding of how their teacher looks at his or her teaching. Two of the three teachers had shared their TPS with

their students at the beginning of the semester as part of their course syllabi.

In Step 2, students rated the accuracy of the TPS, using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). This section of the survey consisted of two parts: 19 items pertaining to various positive and negative aspects of the TPS and five items pertaining to how applicable the TPS was for the course they had just taken from their teacher (see Table 1 for all items). The survey items were developed according to the existing literature on the traditional purposes of a TPS as well as according to the goals and purposes of the student-directed TPS created by the participating faculty members. Each of the authors reviewed an initial draft of the survey and noted any problematic wording and content issues.

In Step 3 of the survey, students provided suggestions for improving the accuracy of their teacher's statement. As veterans of their course and instructor, they returned to the TPS in the survey packet, re-read it, and indicated on it those things that they thought were accurate and not accurate. We encouraged students to provide editorial suggestions (e.g., revise sentences, suggest things to be added or removed) for their instructors about how they could make the statement a more accurate and realistic reflection of how they actually are as a teacher.

In Step 4, participants provided demographic information, including gender, year in school, whether this was the first time they had taken this teacher, the number of times they had taken this teacher previously, and the grade they were expecting to receive in the course. Following the completion of this step, we collected the surveys and thanked the students for their help.

Students completed the survey during the final week of the semester. Their teachers described the purpose of the study, answered any questions about it, and collected student responses in a box or large envelope. Teachers informed students that their responses would be anonymous, that they would not examine student responses until after the semester ended, and that student participation and responses would have no bearing on their final course grade. The researchers obtained Institutional Review Board approval for the project.

Table 1. Criteria used for Student Evaluation of the TPS

Item	Mean	SD	t
This instructor's teaching philosophy statement:			
gives a good sense of who this teacher is as a person	4.63	0.58	38.37
gives specific examples of theories and strategies/ methods they use to achieve teaching and learning goals	4.46	0.62	32.61
uses commonplace phrases or jargon	3.75	1.09	9.45
conveys a sense of this instructor's personal development as a teacher	4.44	0.61	32.13
does not show that this teacher engages in continuous self-evaluation	2.27	1.26	-8.02
clearly defines how this instructor views the student/ teacher relationship	4.64	0.62	36.35
shows that this instructor recognizes possible teaching problems and solutions	4.29	0.76	23.44
fails to show what the instructor likes about teaching	1.85	0.99	-15.89
clearly conveys how this instructor looks at teaching and student learning	4.55	0.60	35.20
clearly describes this teacher's expectations for their students	4.32	0.81	22.18
shows that this instructor values their teaching activities	4.73	0.51	46.59
is very abstract	2.84	1.23	-1.78
highlights this instructor's strengths as a teacher	4.17	0.82	19.57
is poorly written	1.42	0.82	-26.41
includes specific and personal teaching examples and experiences	3.72	0.97	10.24
is well-organized	4.46	0.82	24.48
shows that this instructor is sensitive to student differences in learning	4.21	0.87	18.91
says very little about possible differences in student learning styles	2.44	1.07	-7.16
shows why this person became a teacher	3.94	0.99	12.97
explains why this instructor is doing what they did in this class	4.36	0.76	24.56
is very specific to this particular course	4.12	0.94	16.31
doesn't sound at all like the teacher I had in this course	1.36	0.85	-26.35
accurately shows how this instructor actually taught this course	4.37	0.74	25.34
needs to be revised to accurately reflect this instructor's actual teaching approach	1.64	0.92	-20.22

Note. N = 188; all items were significantly different (*p* < .001) from the scale midpoint (3), except "is very abstract."

Results

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the evaluation items, as well as results of *t*-tests that compared those means to the rating scale midpoint. As the table indicates, all of the items were significantly different from the scale midpoint, except for the "is very abstract" item. Other than this item and the "uses commonplace phrases or jargon," in every other case, students rated the positively worded items above the midpoint and the negatively worded items below the midpoint. These results provide strong support for the accuracy of the teachers' TPSs.

We also compared the data from the teachers of the two undergraduate courses. These analyses revealed that student ratings differed significantly on six of the 24 items. Students rated one of the teachers significantly lower than the other on the extent to which he recognized possible teaching problems and solutions, showed what he likes about teaching, conveyed how he looks at teaching and student learning, and showed sensitivity to student differences in learning in his TPS. On the other hand, students rated the other teacher as significantly lower on how well-organized and the extent to which he showed why he became a teacher in his TPS. These results suggest that both of the teachers have some room for improvement in ensuring the accuracy of their TPSs.

We did not attempt to quantify the Step 3 open-ended comments from students. However, these comments, particularly when more than one student said something similar, provided valuable information about where the teachers could fine-tune or revise their TPS for accuracy. For example, on one TPS, some students commented on a statement about their teacher's use of examples or stories to make a point. Some liked this approach, whereas others felt that he sometimes got off-topic with the class. This teacher might want to revisit that method in his classroom teaching.

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first study to systematically examine student perceptions of their teachers' TPS. In the present sample, the results showed that these student-directed TPSs very accurately reflected the practices of the teachers in their classes. And, the items used in the evaluation instrument as well as the open-ended student responses provide teachers with extensive data that are useful for reflection.

A student-directed TPS can serve both formative and summative purposes. The major advantage of this kind of TPS is its capacity to encourage reflection. The kinds of methods, practices, and experiences that teachers will likely emphasize when their students are the primary audience for their TPS may not necessarily serve the needs of a hiring committee. However, we argue that it can also meet the traditional summative, administrative decision-making uses of a TPS described earlier, especially if the teacher collects student data that provide evidence of actual practices.

The literature discusses creating one's TPS in different formats, typically for administrative decision-making and for personal reflection (Boyer, 1990; Chism, 1998). The innovative, multimedia techniques used to develop and present one's TPS described by Alexander et al. (2012) enhance the ease with which this document can be shared with different audiences. The student-directed TPS can serve as an additional format and, in fact, can be used for multiple purposes. Whether the kind of TPS we are advocating is perceived as valuable by peers and administrators as the traditional version remains to be seen. Future research should assess the perceptions of different TPS formats among different audiences.

It could be argued that one's students are not qualified to provide objective critiques of a TPS. Specifically, their evaluations may be driven mostly by their expected grade in the course. On the other hand, because they are veterans of the course and teacher, their ability to accurately evaluate the TPS has advantages over occasional peer observations or feedback. It is also true that teachers may be hesitant to create a student-directed TPS if it induces fear that they might fail to meet their students' expectations or reflects negatively on their teaching. Even with a well-written TPS, it is often difficult for teachers to assess their teaching practices accurately. Students are the most important information source for teachers to adjust the ways they achieve the goals and values represented in their TPS. The self-reflection aspects of the student-directed TPS appear to be its most valuable attribute. Teachers can use the feedback from their students to assess the accuracy of their statement, the extent to which their philosophy is translated into the classroom, and ways that they can improve their teaching.

Why do students need to know their teachers' philosophies of teaching? Are there specific benefits to the students when seeing their teacher's TPS? If it is accurate, the TPS provides students with a valid preview of how their teacher intends to meet the course learning objectives. Sharing the TPS might also help to personalize the teacher, create a bond between students and teacher, and encourage a sense of community. These are questions that future research could address. Finally, we did not ask students to assess the effects of having seen the TPS at the start of the course on their perceptions and experiences in that course and with that teacher. If

a teacher chooses to use a student-directed TPS, evaluating its effects on students would be a useful extension for future research.

In conclusion, we have made the case that the student-directed TPS provides a new and effective way for the TPS to be used in faculty development. This option should be included in any discussion of best practices for the creation, development, and use of a TPS.

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