



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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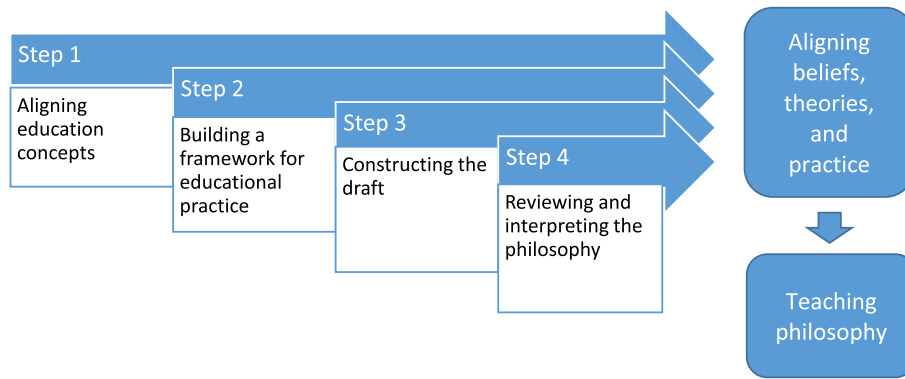


Fig. 1. The four-step model in constructing a teaching philosophy.

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

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