# Teaching philosophy statements as a vehicle for critical reflection

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## Abstract

This work considers what can be gleaned from critically reflecting on several teaching philosophy statements to facilitate professional development. Specifically, three statements, written in 2015, 2019 and 2021 by the author, were investigated using qualitative reflexive thematic analysis to help identify static and dynamic themes within the different educational contexts they represent. This process helps one notice aspects of thinking and practice; the loss of subjective specificity and more articulate ideas around dialogic teaching within a social constructivist paradigm were observed. This reflective process represents a novel utility in statements already written by many educators as well as a useful process for helping professionals develop their teaching philosophies, locating their teaching within the profession, and developing as reflective practitioners.

## Keywords

Reflection; teaching philosophy statement; continuing professional development; HEA accreditation.

## Introduction

Exhibiting reflective practice, or being a reflective practitioner, is one of the pervading character traits of educators who manifest high-quality teaching and elicit high-quality learning (Coe et al., 2014; Dijk *et al.*, 2020). It embodies the sentiment of life-long learning which is realised through the process of reflection. *Reflection* evokes numerous definitions across fields of study (Kinsella, 2010); within education, reflection may be thought of as the process of '…*periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning of what has recently transpired to ourselves and to others in our immediate environment.*' (Raelin, 2002, p. 66). Thus, it comprises of taking *frequent*, *deliberate*, *actions* to consider the *context* and *consequence* of some event. In this work I describe how several, time-removed teaching philosophy statements (TPSs), the events, through the action of qualitative reflexive thematic analysis, can elicit reflection by noticing changes in one's thinking and opinions on teaching and learning in higher education, informing aspects for continuing professional development (CPD).

The frequent and deliberate nature of reflection means it is hard work, it takes time and dedication, internalisation, and always to some extent, vulnerability on the reflector's part (Finlay, 2008; Kelchtermans, 2009; Thomsen et al., 2011; Ganly, 2018); reflective practice is a skill which has to be practised and developed. As such, when taken with the ill-defined end-goal of reflecting on a specific event, it can present barriers for effective reflection. In response, there are several reflective models which attempt to scaffold the reflective process, such as the popular Bolton (Borton, 1970; Rolfe, 2014), Kolb (Kolb, 2014), Gibbs (Gibbs, 1988), Johns (Johns, 1995), and Rolfe et al. (Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper, 2001) models (or 'cycles') of reflection. Similarly, there are many actions to provide the vehicle of reflection available to educators, common ones being peer observation (Lomas and Nicholls, 2005), reflective diaries (Baird et al., 1991), use of digital technology (Baker, 2021; Moreno et al., 2021), and the focus of this work writing TPSs (Beatty, Leigh and Dean, 2009). The essence of these actions is that one *notices* an aspect of their practice, or *notices* a facet of some event, to internalise

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it, and possibly alter their practice, position, thoughts or opinions in response, and thus, continually and incrementally improve as educators (Wain, 2017).

*Teaching philosophy statements as a vehicle for reflection.* A TPS is recognised as a narrative essay of one's beliefs, core values, views and opinions surrounding the whats, whys and hows of teaching and learning, which, taken holistically, forms one's teaching philosophy (Zauha, 2008; Bowne, 2017). It will often be written regarding the relative alignment to established philosophical thinking and theoretical frameworks, which helps to articulate self-identity as a personal interpretation and amalgamation of different experiences and ideologies, which, in turn, influences the way one teaches (Fanghanel, 2009). When combined with representative examples of teaching practice to enunciate the manifestation of one's philosophy *in situ*, the TPS can provide a clear, concise, and highly articulated scholarly showcase of teaching and learning in a specific educational context. Whilst this is the product of writing a TPS, the process of writing a TPS provides a valuable vehicle for reflection. For example, when scaffolded through appropriate philosophical questions and feedback, the TPS can provide insight into preconceived notions of one's thoughts and beliefs on teaching and learning, forcing one to locate and compare, then justify or reorient their practice within wider educational spheres (Coppola, 2002; Eierman, 2008; Merkel, 2020). In summary, a TPS is a contextualised and incrementally evolving document which provides a snapshot of the self-identity of an educator.

Educators will likely need to write a TPS at various stages of their career, examples including: upon entering the profession; applying for promotion; engaging with CPD; gaining membership to an accrediting body (Kearns and Sullivan, 2011). For many, these milestones will be displaced in time meaning one is likely to gain significant experience in the interim of writing one TPS to writing another. This experience will continue to shape one's beliefs, values and opinions on teaching and learning, and thus warrants updating their TPS each time (Schussler *et al.*, 2011; Gambescia, 2013). Indeed, much focus has been placed on the scaffolding and guidance on writing a TPS (Beatty, Leigh and Dean, 2009; Yeom, Miller and Delp, 2018; Laundon, Cathcart and Greer, 2020), as well as the need for updating it (Gambescia, 2013; Brinthaupt, Decker and Lawrence, 2014). In understanding what has been written within a TPS, content analysis is often employed to analyse several TPSs from several writers within a specific educational context (Giorgi and Roberts, 2012; Sankey and Foster, 2012; Hall and Smith, 2021). However, little has focused on what can be gleaned from evaluating several TPSs from *one* educator to *notice* aspects of core philosophy, pedagogy and practice. Herein lies the thesis of this work, which serves as a case study that critically reflects on the context and content of several TPSs written across several years as a reflective exercise to notice aspects of the author's thinking and practice to help identify areas for CPD, eventually feeding back into an updated TPS.

**Educational context and methodology**
The researcher of this work is the writer of the TPSs that are the subject of the ensuing analysis. My current educational context is a Teaching Fellow on an FHEQ (Framework for Higher Education Qualifications) Level 3 Foundation Year provision, which prepares students for a variety of undergraduate disciplines across mathematics, engineering and the physical sciences (Dampier et al., 2019). Three TPSs are considered for this work which were written as part of engagement with the UK Professional Standards Framework through AdvanceHE (AdvanceHE, 2011) across a period of 6 years. These statements were free-flowing pieces of writing, far removed from one another, with significant changes in one's educational context and teaching experience across this timeframe (*vide infra*), and thus provides a narrative for the context and content of the TPSs. A qualitative reflexive thematic analysis provides a suitable method to analyse these TPSs (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019; Silverman, 2011; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Specifically, inductively coding the TPSs from which themes are generated and reviewed within a constructivist paradigm for the ensuing analysis and interpretation, under the Rolfe et al. (2001) reflective cycle. Such an approach was used to spot elements of teaching and practice, philosophy and justification, coupled with the interpretation of what was written at the

**Table 1**. Thematic analysis of Teaching Philosophy Statement 1, written in 2015. Key extracts from coding are given.

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*Subject-specific context*
- '…careful design of experiments and the logical deduction of resulting observations…'.
- 'Science is our best guess to explain the observations around us, given all the available evidence'.
- '…is the way science works to explain phenomena'.

*Questioning as a means for discussion and assessment*
- '…assessment method I employ is discussion'.
- '…ignite constructive discussions between teacher and students'.
- '…with questions for fundamental knowledge ("What is…") to questions which probe understanding ("How would…")'.

*Perceived role as an educator*
- '…explain concepts in many different ways when I identify a student simply "doesn't get it"'.
- '…imposing a professional teacher-student relationship and guiding discussions…'.

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time by the author, in turn generating the themes in the first statement. Themes evolved throughout the second and third statement if the author's interpretation of what was written (when it was written) warranted it, along with any new themes generated. This work is based on writings from the author only, and any names of places or persons have been omitted, anonymised, or removed. As such, no further ethical considerations for this work were necessitated.

**Results and discussion**
*Reflecting on action: the what*. The first TPS was written in 2015 as part of associate fellow accreditation (AdvanceHE, 2011). At this time, I was a PhD candidate whose teaching activities involved running tutorials and workshops for different undergraduate science programmes. The first theme generated in the TPS is the *subject-specific context* (Table 1.). References to teaching and learning are oriented in terms of students learning science and developing science-related skills. Phrases such as 'logical deduction', 'design experiments', and 'explain phenomena' were all stated as indicators for a successful student in science. This was rationalised from a quote from one of my college teachers of physics who once said, 'Science is our best guess to explain the observations around us, given all the available evidence'. Around half the statement focussed on how questioning can be used, leading to the second generated theme, *questioning as a means for discussion and assessment*. An example was given for questioning students about an unseen problem to 'ignite constructive discussions between teacher and students'. The focus of questioning is interesting here as it was the only specific teaching method stated with a justification on why it was used (to promote discussion). Ideas around assessment with some thought on different question types, such as open and closed questions, 'How would' and 'What is' are mentioned, although, again, with limited detail on their use besides '[to] probe understanding'. The final theme generated was the *perceived role as an educator*. Some thoughts were offered on the role, one being the need to provide differentiated support to students indicated as 'explaining concepts in many different ways where I identify a student simply "doesn't get it"'. Ideas around behaviour management were also present in 'imposing a professional teacher-student relationship'.

**Table 2**. Thematic analysis of Teaching Philosophy Statement 2, written in 2019. Key extracts from coding are given.

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*Subject-specific context*
- 'Science for me is a rationalisation of the world around us'.
- '…careful design and implementation of experiments in a logical, data-driven and evidence-based approach'.

*Discussion as a method of teaching*
- '…probe a concept through multi-layered questioning. For example,…'.
- '…entropy…so why is your house not a pile of rubble?'.
- '…draw attention to apparent contradictions'.

*Perceived role of an educator*
- '[student questioning]…providing a learning environment which promotes this'.
- '…drawing out thoughts in a small group…and bringing them into the wider audience'.

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Fast-forward to 2019 and another TPS has been written as part of working towards fellowship accreditation (AdvanceHE, 2011). By this time, I had finished my PhD and completed Qualified Teacher Status in a state secondary school, before taking up the current position (*vide supra*). The theme of *subject-specific context* was generated and was closely linked to scientific education (Table 2.), however, it had been internalised more generally around the ideas of 'evidence-based approaches' to 'rationalise' the world around us. This was linked once again to the core values of what I expect students to exhibit using 'careful design and implementation of experiments in a logical, data-driven and evidence-based approach'. The use of questioning was recurrent in this TPS, although now, this theme is better articulated as *discussion as a method of teaching* (Table 2.). Discussion is used to 'invoke questioning and debate' through the use of 'multi-layered questioning', which is contextualised in an example of how a specific learning objective could be presented to 'draw attention to apparent contradictions' which can be 'resolved' through 'discussions'. The theme of the *perceived role of an educator* has been generated again although now recontextualised by facilitating learning and engaging students in learning (Table 2.). Here the role was now discussed in terms of encouraging student questioning and 'providing a learning environment which promotes this'. Again, an example was offered where activities were posed to small groups and contributions were brought back to the 'wider audience'.

I then come to the most recent TPS from early 2021, which had been written as part of senior fellowship accreditation (AdvanceHE, 2011). Experience was gained through the uptake of more senior administrative roles and engagement with CPD (most notably through a postgraduate certificate in education, PGCE). The contextualisation of the TPS is the first prominent difference compared to previous statements. The generated contextual theme of this TPS was *students developing as reflective practitioners* (Table 3.), as the necessary skill in 'developing students to personify lifelong learning' with specific examples of what this may manifest as, for example, 'provides an impetus for students to begin challenging assertions'. This was underpinned by some key references to literature around reflective practice and educational philosophy. As such, direct references to science were only present in given examples of practice (Table 3.). Instead, questioning and dialogue were both central to much of the TPS, however, the generated theme evolved once again to become more focused around *dialogue as a means for questioning to elicit reflection*. Instead, the questions I want my students to be asking was the focal point, for example, 'I want them [the students]

**Table 3**. Thematic analysis of Teaching Philosophy Statement 3, written in 2021. Key extracts from coding are given.

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*Subject-specific context*
- 'Could I apply this to other areas of science or life?'.
- 'Could we replace all the energy requirements in the UK with one source of renewable energy?'

*Dialogue as a means for questioning to elicit reflection*
- 'I often point out inconsistencies, opposing arguments, create theoretical and hypothetical scenarios to stretch a discussion surrounding the learning objective'.
- 'I will ask open-ended and ambiguous questions, and in small-group tutorials, I will get students to justify their thoughts and positions'.
- '…influenced by the works of Lev Vygotsky'.
- 'I acknowledge the need for scaffolding, to build the initial knowledgebase and confidence, where I can then employ the Socratic methods of argumentative dialogue to encourage reflection on the material being taught'.

*Perceived role as an educator*
- 'I am a facilitator to learning – what I teach establishes a sound knowledgebase of a topic for a student to practice, consolidate, reflect and engage in discourse with'.
- '…role of an educational facilitator within an increasingly constructivist paradigm'.
- '…a mentor to these students on this journey to become confident reflective practitioners'.

*Students developing as reflective practitioners*
- '…developing students to personify lifelong learning'.
- '…modelling of practice and the setting of expectations at the core of my teaching philosophy'.
- '…external questioning and internal monologing by a student is beginning to evaluate, manipulate and investigate the example they have been modelled – it displays critical and creative thinking, independent and abstract thought'.

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to ask questions like: "Why do I do it this way; can I do it another way"…', which '…displays critical and creative thinking, independent and abstract thought'. The pedagogy for eliciting such questions and subsequent discourse was offered, specifically, in the context of scaffolding a dialogue between teacher and students, and among students. The 'Socratic method of augmentative dialogue' and the 'Zone of Proximal Development (Cheyne and Tarulli, 1999)' were named as influences for these techniques. The location of my philosophy amongst schools of thought was acknowledged as 'within an increasingly constructivist paradigm (Alkove and McCarty, 1992)'.
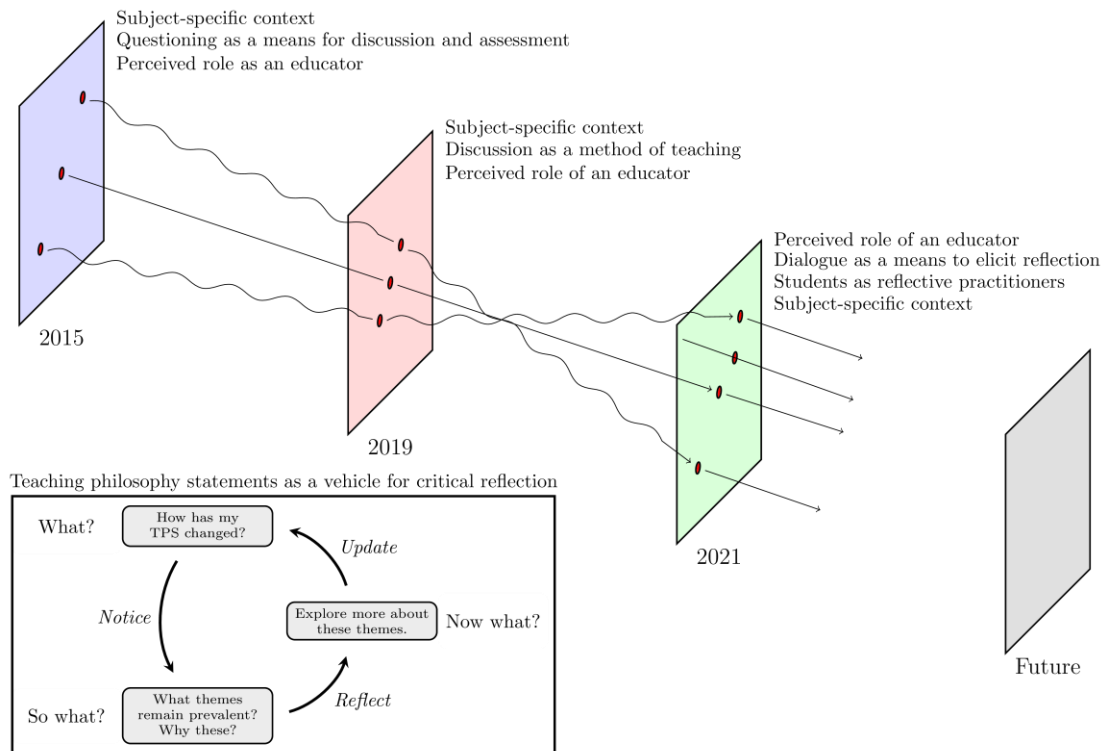
**Figure 1.** An illustrative summary of the static and dynamic themes generated in each TPS (2015, 2019 and 2021), where height indicates the prevalence of theme in each TPS. The evolution of the themes will continue into any future updated TPS. **Inset**: a simple reflective cycle to notice aspects of the themes in each TPS, critically reflecting on changes between TPSs, and exploring them as a focus for professional development which will likely update a future TPS.

*So what?* Comparison of themes generated within each TPS provides a rich narrative for what has and hasn't changed over significant time, see Figure 1. There is a dramatic shift from the first TPS which was very subject-specific contextualised by the scientific knowledge and skills students are expected to develop, a hallmark of novice (science) educators (Brophy, 2006), to a more general context of students developing as reflective practitioners. This marks a significant change in teaching philosophy, where learning is seen as more general and subject specificity is replaced with representative examples of teaching and learning. This likely has come about from the acquisition of experience of teaching and learning from the perspective of an educator, rather than a learner (Wolff, Jarodzka and Boshuizen, 2017). Indeed, the first TPS was written whilst my context was both as an educator (demonstrating tutorials and workshops to undergraduates) and as a learner (pursuing postgraduate studies) all within a predominantly scientific environment (Baker, 2017). It is perhaps unsurprising then that the first TPS was so scientifically contextualised resulting in the limited view of teachers teaching science and learners learning science. Moving forward, as experience was gained in developing and delivering a curriculum (in secondary and higher education), less subject specificity was present as one acknowledges the common traits of successful learners transcends the subject (Bassot, 2016). Here, the ability to exhibit reflective practice is held as a central skill one wants students to develop. This occurred with a similar shift in one's perceived role as an educator, from a transmitter of knowledge to a facilitator of discussion and debate, as well as a mentor to students developing reflective practice commensurate with the loss of explicit references to behaviour management (Wolff, Jarodzka and Boshuizen, 2017). Indeed, this was quite prevalent in the third TPS, and so generated a new theme (rather than an evolved theme) of *students developing as reflective practitioners*.

The use of questioning was a persistent theme of all TPSs, however, the justification of its use became increasingly more articulate as a means of facilitating dialogue to elicit reflection in discourse, seen from the generated theme of *questioning as a means for discussion and assessment* in the first TPS evolving into *dialogue as a means for questioning to elicit reflection* by the third TPS. In the first TPS, the majority of questioning was from educator to student to assess knowledge and understanding. Whilst some ideas around discussions were present, no justifications or context was given for what such discussions would be, or why they would be used. In the second TPS, and more so in the third, questioning was a technique to get students to think more deeply about something, with the anticipation that they will evaluate and critique it with their own constructed questions. Thus, a rationale had been established for this teaching method, making the teaching far more deliberate (Rathgen, 2006).

The final theme which underwent significant evolution across TPSs was the development of an evidence-base to underpin one's teaching philosophy. In the first TPS, influences from one's time as a student were clear, both from direct quotes of other educators' thinking, and experiences of being a student as a basis for what one's students should be like (O'Brien and Schillaci, 2002). As new experience was gained as an educator in more diverse contexts and to different audiences of students, thinking involved acknowledging the difference between students and their learning, elements of differentiation and inclusion were coming through the TPS. This was undoubtedly influenced through training within a secondary school context, given the emphasis of differentiation in the Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2011), specifically, Teachers' Standard 5 'Adapt teaching to respond to the strengths and needs of all pupils' (p. 11), manifesting more clearly as differentiated approaches to make teaching more accessible and inclusive to a range of learners. Elements of this training, as well as CPD through the PGCE and engagement with literature (Baker, 2020, 2021; Baker and Spencely, 2020), also made aspects of teaching more deliberate. In this way, evidence from educational literature was interweaved with experience to help rationalise the thoughts and opinions on teaching and learning presented in the TPS. In fact, the first TPS has no references to sources of information at all, whereas the third TPS had references to key thinkers and awareness of philosophical paradigms. This suggests that the very epistemological position of thinking had evolved, from something representing 'absolute' and 'transitional knowing', to a clearer position of independent knowing as well shift to the construction of meaning from knowledge (Magolda, 2004, 2008).

*Now what?* Reflecting on how the TPSs have changed over time, and appreciating their evolutionary nature, serves as an impetus for development. Indeed, one even might argue the idea of what a TPS is only became understood on the third writing attempt where thoughts and opinions were acknowledged within the wider context of education and literature, as well as evidencing the evolutionary nature of the self-identity of an educator (Conway and Clark, 2003; Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop, 2004; Kelchtermans, 2009). What is particularly interesting is the influences that shaped the TPSs. The first is heavily influenced by one's life experience and prior education (Weiss, 2002; Avalos, 2016), which is important to acknowledge to reduce confirmation bias where one restricts their teaching to the way they were taught, a key reason to reflect on the *whys* of one's teaching (Smagorinsky, 2010). This also serves to help locate one's thinking and practice within the wider educational literature and how it has changed. Considering how these changes have come about provides insight into how an educator's perceptions and practices can evolve with experience, e.g. less concern surrounding behaviour and task completion and more focus on student learning. It presented the persistent (albeit articulated differently) use of dialogic techniques for teaching and learning at the core of each TPS. This emphasises a specific dimension of practice that should be researched more deeply within one's context as it is important to one's core values and self-identity as an educator. This would make the use of dialogue in teaching far more deliberate and rationalised through more concrete examples of its use, improving pedagogical knowledge for this technique, and feeding back into an updated TPS.

It is acknowledged there are multiple avenues for subjectivities and bias in this analysis (Roulston and Shelton, 2015). The organic nature of the coding by virtue of being inductive within a qualitative sensibility paradigm means other researchers would likely come to view the same materials, but code and generate themes differently (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2016; Clarke and Braun, 2018). However, given the basis of this exercise is to notice aspects of the TPSs for self-reflection, this does not take away the value of the process itself. Similarly, interpretation of the themes across TPSs is open for discussion as much relies on the implicit meaning behind what was written in the TPSs and the mindset of the writer at the time (and thus cannot be separated from the researcher's analysis). Again, the value is in the reflective process and the subjective nature of what is perceived as the important static and dynamic aspects across statements is, in this work, somewhat irrelevant so long as the reflection is authentic. If the process causes one to notice aspects of their teaching and learning leading them to ask the whats and whys of their practice, then there is a basis for development (Avidov-Ungar, 2016). Thus, reflexive thematic analysis provides a flexible and thoughtful process to engage with one's data, which extends the utility of this work; educators can critically reflect on their work to focus CPD on (as this work serves as a case study) and update their TPSs; educators may use the process of reflecting on TPSs as part of teacher training, for example, student-teachers can write a TPS upon entering the profession and another towards the end of their course, then use thematic (or similar) analysis to kindle development of reflective practice. Importantly, for many educators, the TPSs have already been written meaning this exercise presents additional utility of their work to develop as a reflective practitioner and inform professional development.

## Conclusions

The process of reflecting across multiple teaching philosophy statements provides a clear insight into the evolutionary nature of an educator's thinking and opinions on teaching and learning. Qualitative reflexive thematic analysis provides a structure to help articulate how specific experiences shape the content of such statements, as well as persistent themes which are held central to the core values of the educator. This work serves as a case study of what can be learned from this process and how it can serve to inform continuing professional development along specific dimensions of teaching and learning, the result of which will lead to an updated teaching philosophy statement. Importantly, this is a deliberate process. This reflective exercise may also find utility for developing reflective practice in other contexts such as teacher training, where new professionals can reflect on the whats, whys and hows of their teaching and practice upon entering the profession and what has (and hasn't) changed when they have finished their training.

## Acknowledgements

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