New Practitioners Forum

Writing a teaching philosophy: An evidence-based approach

Full-time faculty members seeking promotion or tenure are not the only people asked to write a teaching philosophy. Growing numbers of newly hired or junior faculty members and postgraduate year 1 or year 2 pharmacy residents are asked to prepare one as part of interview, employment, or residency requirements.[1,2] Formulating a teaching philosophy is a reflective writing assignment whereby teachers describe, analyze, and justify their teaching methods and consider areas for improvement.[3] Determining and articulating one's teaching, learning, and assessment beliefs in order to craft a teaching philosophy may be difficult, and many people do not know where to begin.[2,4]

This article describes nine evidence-based steps to use in structuring a teaching philosophy and should help new practitioners writing a teaching philosophy for the first time, as well as those making revisions or updates.[5] These nine steps align with a scholarly teaching framework suggested by Glassick and colleagues and the Academic Affairs Committee of the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy, which emphasizes increased accountability in student learning in accordance with six standards of scholarly work.[6-9] Using these steps when writing a personal teaching philosophy will allow the writer to expand beyond simply describing teaching beliefs and methods.

Step 1—Prepare an introduction. The first step in writing a teaching philosophy is to start with an introduction that goes beyond a few sentences flatly forecasting that a discussion of teaching beliefs will follow. Instead, one intriguing strategy is to hook the audience by explaining why teaching was chosen as a career and some favorite aspects of teach-
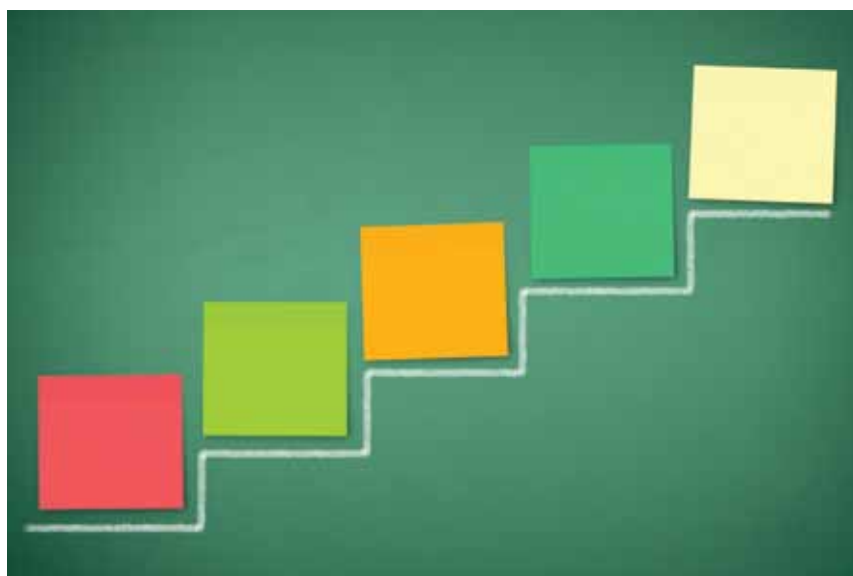
ing. Another engaging option is to discuss an influential teaching encounter or mentor. The introductory section should end with a smooth transition to the next, most important, section.

Step 2—Describe teaching beliefs. Achieving the second step of the writing process requires practitioners to self-evaluate and codify their own beliefs, which is often easier said than done. Many burgeoning educators, especially those with very limited teaching experience or formal training, may experience particular difficulty in this step because their beliefs may not yet be clearly formed or strongly held. A good way to

begin is by listing, in simple terms, how students learn best and associated effective teaching strategies. Additional assistance in articulating teaching beliefs can be found by searching the literature of educational psychology in areas such as learning theories (e.g., behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism), effective teaching principles (e.g., active learning, problem-based learning, cooperative learning), motivation (internal or external), and tenets of scholarly teaching: clear goals, adequate preparation, appropriate methods, significant results, effective presentation, and reflective critique.[8] These theories, strategies, and principles can serve as a solid foundation for a teaching belief system.

In our experience, the most common mistake in this step of crafting a teaching philosophy is trying to describe teach-

ing beliefs by simply listing a string of buzzwords related to teaching and learning (e.g., "active learning," "high expectations," "peer learning," "mentoring") and then abruptly ending the description without elaborating on those concepts in a manner that best reflects the already stated teaching and learning beliefs and then transitions smoothly to the next section.

Step 3—Explain the importance of beliefs. The third step in crafting a well-formulated teaching philosophy is to explain how the educator's beliefs enhance students' learning—why each belief is important for developing students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes and how it contributes to their success in the profession. Through this step, the writer expands on the philosophical underpinnings of the belief system to clearly convey how he or she perceives the value of each teaching concept directly as it relates to the learners.

Step 4—Provide evidence based on educational theory. In the fourth step of the process, the educator further expands the explanation of the importance of the teaching beliefs elaborated in step 3, supporting them by citing evidence from the professional literature compiled from journals such as *Academic Medicine, New England Journal of Medicine, American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy, American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education,* and *Journal of Educational Psychology.* This step grounds those beliefs in the science of teaching, establishes legitimacy, and supports best practices.

Step 5—Describe teaching methods. Once the teaching beliefs have been systematically described and justified, it is crucial to explain how they translate into teaching success when carried out during the actual education of students. This explanation should specifically describe the teaching methods employed (perhaps with illustrative anecdotes) and how the educator's broad teaching strategy (i.e., the manner in which the methods are applied) has evolved over time.

Step 6—Describe methods of learning assessment. Closely related to the teaching method description, this step entails describing how the effectiveness of each teaching method is assessed in order to demonstrate student learning in a fashion that relates directly to the stated teaching beliefs. This specific description of assessment methods should include examples or collected data illustrating improved student learning as a direct result of the teaching belief or strategy (e.g., a description of the outcomes of student assessments). Detailed information on the assessment strategies used and the evidence gathered to show their positive impact are often missing from written teaching philosophies. Taking this step helps demonstrate alignment among the teaching beliefs, how they are applied, and how their impact is assessed, which are all essential elements of effective teaching.

Step 7—Provide a feedback summary. Individuals preparing teaching portfolios are often unsure of how to document the student evaluations of the teaching they receive and, unfortunately, some instructors merely present such results in raw-data form. Instead, it is far better to quantitatively and qualitatively evaluate student evaluations and use the results as evidence of eliciting—and heeding—student feedback to validate the teaching philosophy on an ongoing basis. For completeness, feedback from multiple sources (e.g., peers, course coordinators, students, self-ratings) about the educator's ability to translate beliefs into effective teaching practices should be summarized and included in the teaching philosophy statement. All efforts should be made to quantify teaching success with hard data in order to illustrate the use of evidence-based best practices.

Step 8—Prepare a strong conclusion. The teaching philosophy should end with a conclusion that not only summarizes the educator's belief system but also highlights future goals and teaching directions related to those beliefs. Just as a compelling statement should start with an intriguing hook, so it should end with a forceful and persuasive summation to tie together the concepts presented and leave the reader with a lasting favorable impression.

Step 9—Provide a reference list. When the professional literature and other supportive evidence are mentioned in a written statement of teaching philosophy, it is important to list the sources of such evidence in a formal reference list.

Closing notes. Adherence to these nine steps in creating a statement of teaching philosophy will, in and of itself, benefit the writer by the use of evidence to support one's teaching beliefs and methods and may increase the overall length of the teaching philosophy. Moreover, while some practitioners may assume that the statement must be limited to a one- or two-page document, that is not the case. Satisfactorily describing teaching beliefs and philosophy—including literature citations supporting the beliefs and teaching and assessment methods, as well as data gathered about outcomes and learner and peer feedback—may require additional pages; if the information is pertinent, concisely presented, and well organized, a three- to five-page document will not be considered excessively long.

Above all, it is important to remember that the teaching philosophy is a perpetual work in progress. As the practitioner gains more teaching experience, discusses teaching with colleagues, continues to read relevant literature, and continually reflects on personal practice activities and the insights gained during those activities, the teaching philosophy must be periodically revisited and revised.[5]

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