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Guided by theory, informed by practice: Teaching philosophies of academics from universities of teacher education

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Abstract

What influences the teaching philosophy of teachers from universities of teacher education the most? Is it theory? Professional development? Experience and personal beliefs? Articulating a teaching philosophy allows a reflection on one's identity as a teacher and guides behaviour by codifying a set of principles by which a teacher acts (Goodyear and Alchin, 1998). This is a means for university teachers to share their developed values, principles and practices.

In this study, we provide insights on teaching philosophy statements from academics of an international network. For its analysis, the conceptual framework of Schönwetter et al. (2002) is used as a reference for looking at seven dimensions (purpose of teaching and learning; role of the teacher; role of the student; methods, and assessment) and two framing devices (critical incidents and acknowledgement of contextual factors). Such insights reassured us on the appropriateness of writing teaching philosophies for professional development purposes.

1   Introduction

Most teachers have a teaching philosophy, which may or may not be formalized into a written document, the Teaching Philosophy Statement (TPS). A TPS is a true representation of what guides the author's behaviour as an academic and a teacher. For the writer of a teaching philosophy, the ultimate question is "Why do I teach?" The answer can be constructed by gathering the reactions to several "what" questions, such as: *What is the concept of teaching and learning that I hold? Which methodology of teaching do I use? What is the overarching goal of education? What are the outcomes of my teaching which I strive to observe?*

To Schönwetter et al. (2002: 98), a teaching philosophy is "a systematic and critical rationale that focuses on the important components defining effective teaching and learning in a particular discipline and/or institutional context." Thus, each teaching philosophy reflects not only personal beliefs about teaching and learning, but also disciplinary cultures, institutional structures and cultures, as well as stakeholder expectations.

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We established an international network where participants were asked to write their TPSs. LECU (Learning Cultures in Universities) is a network that brings together 24 teachers and curriculum developers from universities throughout Albania, Kosovo and Switzerland with the aim of sharing best teaching practices among academics at universities of teacher education. Over a period of four years, they met face-to-face and online to carry out a series of guided assignments, such as duos (a joint inquiry between two members of the same institution) and trios (a project between members of the three different countries).

In this paper we present a summary of the analysis of LECU TPSs. The conceptual framework of Schönwetter et al. (2002) is used as a reference. It identifies seven components: values and goals of teaching and learning; concept of teaching; concept of learning; teaching methodology; interaction with students, assessment of students' learning, and professional growth. Additionally, we looked into the transcultural dimension. Finally, we refer to the importance to educational developers of designing programmes which incorporate TPSs.

2   The study

In this research project we asked ourselves: How diverse are the TPSs of academics from universities of teacher education in three different countries? What are their goals and beliefs? And how do they describe their practices?

We performed a content thematic analysis (Krippendorf, 2004) of 20 TPSs of LECU participants. They were organized around goals, beliefs and practices along the abovementioned categories. Texts were assigned labels and were coded by two researchers to assure reliability.

3   The results

We group the results according to LECU participants' values and goals, beliefs and practices.

3.1   Goals

The student-centred goals of a teacher can vary in considerable ways. A statement can demonstrate whether one's goals are quality-oriented, inspirational, missionary, content/knowledge-oriented, skill-oriented, lifelong career-oriented, or affective and interpersonal goals. Some examples of goals can be found here:

Values	Goals of Teaching and Learning
Quality	"Provide best possible education for my students." (L01)
	"Characteristics of good teaching: high cognitive activation, learning intensity and consolidation" (L07)
Integration	"All lessons are language-conscious, with the aim of cumulatively expanding and deepening students' competences in all educationally relevant languages and subjects." (L17)
	"I achieved for myself the perfect combination of both being a teacher educator, but also having psychology deeply rooted in my work." (L04)
Inspiration	"Relationships with life and giving opportunities to compare, judge, evaluate, and do things independently makes teaching more attractive and effective for students." (L09)
Mission	"I believe a teacher is a missionary and lives to serve. A teacher is dedicated to learning, to his or her discipline, to his or her students, and to asking the future the best possible place for all of us to live." (L10)

Table 1: Goals of teaching and learning

In our analysis, most goals relate to the need to provide good quality teaching, enabling students to make successful careers, helping to shape society and fulfilling individual needs. In some cases, they are personal-centred/oriented, society-centred, and discipline-centred.

3.2   Beliefs

Some sample beliefs are illustrated in the statements. They are tied to each individual's original purpose in teaching, and some have shifted with experience.

Beliefs	Beliefs about Teaching and Learning
Students	"Each student has a different learning style … and the potential to learn." (L01) "My students should have in mind that they aren't teaching only a subject but they are developing children's personalities." (L05)
Learning	"… is an active process." (L15, L14) "As a teacher I can create an environment that stimulates learning, but I cannot directly impose 'content' to be learned. This is also due to very different learning biographies and mental constructions of learners. Therefore, I know connecting with prior knowledge is key." (L15) "I know how students develop and learn. I recognize that students actively construct and transform their own knowledge based on experiences and interactive learning." (L11)
Role of the teacher	"a change agent taking into account students potentials and their learning styles" (L03) "identify problems, difficulties, but also find out student interests and provide support for each of them. … care for the results of student achievement, provide continuous information on their progress or stagnation and motivate them in further work" (L04)
Teacher as learner	"we are all learners, we grow and develop together with our students" (L04) "is a learning process for myself too" (L13)
Learning activities	"I forecast the relevant learning activities and execute different teaching methods in order to both challenge students' intellectual abilities and allow each of them to think and grow. I exert every effort to present the instructional materials in a variety of formats that respond to student's different learning style and maximize their learning." (L11)
Assessment	"The grade should be an incentive and assessment must be objective, reasonable, public and with relevant arguments." (L01)
Environment and climate	"A diligent and reliable organization of a course is critical to create a constructive learning climate." (L15) "I arrange my lessons rhythmically and with different didactic and methodical suggestions in the sense of a pedagogical *double-decker*." (L07) "For maximizing the performance of students, I prefer to design activities based on a very famous Yerkes-Dobbs law in psychology which emphasizes '*that for maximum performance, anxiety should be neither too high nor too low, but somewhere in between*'." (L06)
Institution and community	"Beams, Higgins, Nicol (2012) refer to a paper in which Higgins argues that developing a connection with place provides a start point for relationships with people within a community." (L16) "The promotion of learners in the language of education is, of course, the joint responsibility of all persons and institutions involved." (L17)

Table 2: Beliefs about teaching and learning

3.3   Practices

Next, some selected examples of how teachers reflect on their practices:

Practices	Practice Teaching and Learning
Activating competences	"Support of self-regulated learning requires good tasks and diligent consulting of students. These are two key topics I follow to this day." (L15)
	"I give students a lot of space so that they can discus, analyze, and argue with each other and with me… I'm a fan of using digital media while I encourage my student to bring their devices to faculty settings." (L05)
Multi-methodic	"Lectures, questioning, practice and feedback are some of the teaching methods I use in my classroom." (L01)
	"Learning journals, peer assessment, debates, field trips and experiential learning…" (L12)
	"The idea is to integrate outdoor learning in daily teaching activities. This should be considered in a place-based learning." (L16)
Tutorials	"In the tutorials, we conduct group exercises, presentations, discussions, etc. where students can reveal their full abilities – their analytical skills, their depth of thought, ability to synthesize, criticize and make judgments." (L04)

Table 3: Teachers' reflections on their practices

The different strategies and methods used take into account the premises of active learning that is cooperative, dialogic and reflexive, and they also challenge students' cognitive abilities.

As for analysis of the language used, the TPSs were analysed according to anecdotal references, conceptual statements, the "me-I-my" perspective, "should-must" accounts as well as value and goal-oriented reflections. For example, there are interesting anecdotes on the start of the teaching experience and the idea that teaching is like parenting in the way it involves a careful observation of the young student's development. Another example refers to the observable differences in the quality of two otherwise very similar seminars: "*This spring, I taught two courses on self-regulated learning in two different contexts with two very different feedback (in one course the feedback was outstanding, in the other it was devastating). I try to understand what made the difference: …*" (L15).

Most statements start with "I-me-my", indicating an individual view or experience: "*Personally, as a teacher I give tests over the studied material. Since I teach English as a foreign language, I also use analytic assessment with students…*" (L01). A few write in a less personal way using expressions with "should-must", suggesting that it would be expected but perhaps not necessarily performed or achieved: "*Based on the requirements of the curriculum, we must first clearly define the goals we are expecting from the learner, what skills should demonstrate, what values should I cultivate, what behavior should I reflect and what knowledge I have to own*" (L03).

Many actions appear to be guided by theory, which comes from either research, pre-service or in-service teacher training, and which teachers have adapted to their own experience and intuition. "*I have in mind the Vygotsky theory of effective learning while social interacting with each other*" (L05).

In summary, we can maintain that the teaching philosophies of university teachers of universities and faculties of education are very powerful statements representing beliefs,

values and practices that are well rooted in their own (past and present) personal, familiar and professional experiences as educators, coaches, counsellors, educational administrators and parents, as well as in the theories which they firmly believe should guide their teaching practice. Both socio-constructivist theories and specific discipline-related theories are didactically and critically reflected. Students are at the forefront of the teaching experience and their learning needs are taken into account in planning courses, devising the educational environment, promoting sound interaction and designing authentic assessments.

4   Conclusions

Three main conclusions can be derived from the study:

1. TP is a useful roadmap through which teachers can identify their pedagogical strengths and also weaknesses. Since reflecting about teaching philosophies is a way of making private theories more acceptable, which leads to a healthy challenging of "espoused theories" (Brookfield, 2015), TPSs have become popular assignments in academic development. In this study, writing a TPS has proven to be a challenging yet pleasant task.

2. Teaching is of more a value than a research-based activity. One strength of academics at universities of teacher education is a desire to prove that their actions as teachers are primarily guided by research. However, despite justifying teaching choices using literature, the guiding force of most of the choices appears to be more a set of values than research-based knowledge. Teachers are unable to escape from the fact that "teaching is a value-laden activity" (Goodyear & Allchin, 2001).

3. Values are strongly embedded in the vocational goals, pedagogical knowledge and previous experiences of academics at universities of teacher education. They are, therefore, rather independent of origin, context or culture. While in the analysis we were looking at possible differences across countries, a transcultural dimension is not evident. Teacher trainers, school curriculum designers and university academic developers, regardless of country, university or teaching discipline, define themselves as educators who provide an attractive student-oriented approach with a good mixture of expert knowledge input and practical application based on their experiences of teaching.

Acknowledgements

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