

Christopher Richmann: Becca Cassady, thank you for joining the show.

Becca Cassady: Thanks for having me.

CR: We are talking today about teaching philosophy statements. And even though this is of course something that faculty in general deal with some extent throughout their careers, we're especially concerned about the graduate student experience because the stakes are pretty high when it comes to applying to jobs and having all the documents. And we see increasingly that search committees and institutions are asking for teaching philosophy statements from applicants. So as we talked about this, you've heard me talk about this in different settings, but I kinda want to clear the air about some mini concerns are caveats that we should say at the beginning when it comes to teaching philosophy statements. And I sent you these ahead of time so that you can sort of see where my brain was on this. But I want you to jump in on this. I've got four caveats or concerns when it comes to teaching philosophy statements for the sort of, let's just think of like the typical graduate student who is on the job market, as we say. The first one being that this is a genre of writing that, that the person writing it has almost zero familiarity with, very little familiarity with it. And I think that we often don't give graduate students sort of the perspective that here's a new genre of writing that we need to start talking about, analyze, and then figure out how to approach it from that perspective.

BC: Yeah, as with every piece of writing, there are conventions that we need to be thinking about and it's really easy to think, well, I, you know, especially if you're from a writing heavy, writing intensive discipline, you're like, I should be able to write this, but if no one's actually taught you how, there's no reason that you should magically know. So don't get discouraged about that.

CR: Yes. They may have, as graduate students as they may already have several publications on their CV. And begin to think, oh, I can write, I'm a writer. But you throw anyone into a new, a new rhetorical situation shall we say, And there's gonna be a period of difficulty and struggles are finding, you know what, when I, when I go to graduate students gatherings, I'm often invited to give some kind of talk on teaching philosophy statements. And I said, What if someone said, you know, write a haiku? And it's supposed to be like a great haiku. And all that they did is give you one example haiku. And all sudden you're just supposed to produce this thing and you really don't understand not only the mechanics of it, but like how to make it seem like what makes up?

BC: Yes. Yeah, yeah. I think it's just really important also to use models when you're looking at new genres like this too. So if you can get your hands on some teaching philosophies from other people too. That's a big help and learning.

CR: Because you always want to balance. Here's the rules and conventions with, here's how those things were actually playing out in someone's like that. So this idea of genre is one concern that I just think the forefront. Another one is a little bit more difficult just because it's more multifaceted in its implications. And that is that we, that we at the academy, we ask graduate students goes on the job market to produce these teaching philosophy statements when they really have little or sometimes no real teaching experience. A lot of times in STEM, for instance, you know, they, they, they led labs, but they didn't have the experience of like creating a whole course on their own or, or writing a syllabus or creating assignments. Thinking about the alignment of objectives and assessments, all those things that we don't go into thoughtful, reflective teaching. And yet we say, let's give me a document that shows, you know, how to do all this with zero or very little experience. What are The implications of that from your perspective?

BC: Yeah. Well, I would just say you need to try to capitalize on whatever you have. So I would emphasize any guest lecturing or guest teaching draw on those. Familiarize yourself with teaching

literature. So like what, what is said about teaching in the field, the scholarly implications and those discussions and think about what you would do. But I do agree. So e.g. in my program, we started teaching like a 2-2 load in our second year. And so we have a lot of experience, but even in that, a lot of it, we didn't always develop, we didn't develop that from the ground up, right? We were handed a curriculum and then modified it. But even then, be thinking about what am I believing about teaching? And it's hard sometimes to get to the root of that. Even when you do have that experience.

CR: As a graduate student, I had in religion, I've had probably by comparison, quite a bit of freedom to craft my course from the ground up and they did the same it all through. But even in that setting, I was given a list of, I think, half a dozen textbooks that I had to choose from. And so even something as simple as that, a full-time permanent faculty member would just take for granted like in many circumstances I can choose whatever textbook. There are some stem departments that might have agreed on a common textbook, but in most situations you've got that freedom to make those choices and then reflect on what worked and what didn't. But there's just so many constraints as a graduate student when you're teaching. Not to mention like the time that you can devote to. Yes, you're right.

BC: If you start later in your program in terms of teaching, you also don't have the opportunity to see how that develops and what changes you would make as you realize, Oh, I don't like that way of teaching, what would I do instead? So just be mindful of that. And you can even allude to what you would do differently, I think I think so. But don't get discouraged. I would right now if you're listening to this, be thinking about where are some opportunities for me to teach. I would reach out to professors if you're not already teaching, ask to guest lecture, things like that, to start getting some of that

CR: It's so interesting that you say you don't have experienced teaching until later on in your, in your graduate student experience because I think you're coming from our English department where they, you do teach quite a bit pretty early on. In some of our other disciplines. It's not until year five or something like that. Do you have any thoughts about the pros and cons of that?

BC: Oh goodness. I feel like that's a whole can of worms. I open it. I think, um, I think it was a great learning experience for me to be able to start early on. And to get all of that experience. I did have to devote a lot of time to it. So I was in coursework and doing that as well. And so I just had to balance. I, I'm glad that I love teaching. And so that is what really one of the main factors in me wanting to get my PhD. And so I didn't mind putting in the time; for other people, it felt a little more burdensome I think. But also, I do think there's value in starting early and being able to develop as a teacher because you have a--There's an identity as a teacher that's different from your identity as a researcher and a student. And so to be able to develop that, I think is really valuable. But again, don't get discouraged if you don't have that early on because then you can really focus on your research and then how that then plays into your teaching, which is something we can talk about later in this podcast.

CR: But yeah, it's different for every person, developing their parallel and kind of adjacent and interwoven identities, but neither own nurturing along, along the way. I remember, because we didn't start teaching until I think it was the fifth year. I remember many of my colleagues saying because at that point you're, you're writing your dissertation. Saying, oh, the, the, the teaching preface, just absorbing so much of my time. And I remember thinking then and I'm clarifying my thoughts now to go about this is that we didn't have any experience, Call that, that balancing until the stakes are really high because like you got to write your dissertation, you know? And so we didn't have any, any skills of how to balance those two things. Whereas if you maybe give me a new teaching earlier, there's other liabilities to that, but at least we would have had the opportunity to figure out how did these together in the same person with only 24 hours in each day.

BC: Yes. I would agree with that.

CR: So what are the real sore spots it for me on this is writing, teaching philosophy statements. Because I spend a lot of that kind of thinking about teaching and thinking about how to communicate effective teaching practices to people. And I feel as though I've been in my current position at the ATL for a little over five years. I feel like I'm only just now developing a philosophy, like a true philosophy of teaching. And yet we ask students, and this goes back again to experience. So just in terms of like sophistication of the thoughts, not just the writing but the thoughts too about teaching. Their inexperience, that the unavoidable inexperienced there. And how do we if we're on the end of reading these documents for as a search committee, like, how do we read them generously and still expect something important to be said out of biggest. Any thoughts about that?

BC: Well, I would agree. I mean, even as a grad student who was applying places, I still felt like I was writing my teaching philosophy. And I was like, what do I, what am I saying? What is my philosophy? And so honestly, and I, I was gonna talk about this later, but I think one of the biggest things is before you even start writing your philosophy statement, be brainstorming these very general questions that seem basic, but we don't often articulate for ourselves. So things like, how do people learn? How do I facilitate that learning? What goals do I have for my students? Why do I teach the way that I do? Those bigger, broader categories and then even more specific. So then what do I implement in the classroom? Are these things working? How do I know that they're working? What effect do these things have on my students? So these bigger things, before you try to craft some beautiful statement, you need to be thinking about those things more broadly so that you can then connect it to actual practice. But it's difficult. Again, if you don't have a ton of experience, but you still need to be thinking about your ideas. What do you think learning is? What do you think needs to happen in the classroom? And that can help shape a little bit.

CR: So for your own self, you need to clarify these thoughts. And then when it comes to articulating them, putting them into a document, there's the additional challenge of In your field. rhetoric and composition your audience matters so much. You send them off to the search committees. And you don't really know like how sophisticated in their understanding, those readers, their understanding is of things like how people learn and effective pedagogy. And you might get people in the search committee who have really pretty poor understanding of these things and are looking for stuff that really doesn't align. It's a real difficult situation.

BC: I would agree to that. I would say there's only so much you can do. You need to do your best to really lay out not just what you do, but why. And I think if you can justify that and show why that works, then that helps alleviate some of that.

CR: Yeah. Yeah. So to some degree it becomes an argument for persuasion. And I think that's the best. We can be talking from about this other, other, other angles too, but it's best to maybe avoid the buzzwords that don't really mean anything. But instead, take that opportunity to say, Well, if I'm tempted to say something like critical thinking, what do I really mean by that? And how do I really make a case for that thing being important? Then maybe you come around to persuading your reader of what you initially would just have said is critical thinking.

BC: Yes. Yeah.

CR: Another thing that is I think of some concern here and this again comes, is maybe my own, my own psychology on this is that we call these things philosophy statements. When maybe that's far too

generous for What we're actually asking. True, true philosophy has a necessary freedom to it and unboundedness to it. But, you know, anyone who teaches in higher ed, in any formal education setting, for the most part, there's, there's boundaries everywhere you look, you know, there's there's the semester schedule. There's the three day, three day a week versus two day a week. In some departments, There's expectations of midterms and finals, even when you walk into a classroom and higher ed, if you know, you probably don't have much choice about what room you're teaching in. So you might get a room with, that that has very few affordances for things that you might want to do like active learning, things like that. So if you've got a classroom with chairs bolted down and no extra room for students to actually formed groups. So that kind of thing, like, all the philosophy in the world does, it can't, can't overcome some of those things. So I think that we sometimes, maybe the reason that writers of teaching philosophy statements struggle with this because they have in their mind that they are supposed to be writing that philosophy. But really we're asking for something a little more finely grained than that. Like, how do you succeed within the boundaries?

BC: Exactly. Yes.

CR: That's not a word for it right now.

BC: Well, no. That makes sense. Yes. You're basically proving that within the confines of the constraints that you've been given. This is how you would play this out. Yeah. Yeah. I don't know that there's a real way around that. That's just the reality. So I think, but again, explaining why you think certain things should be done a certain way. I think that's important because wherever you're going the constraints might be similar, but they might not be. And so you need to show that adaptability as well.

CR: Yeah. I mean, there's, there's growing literature on this. It might be a perfectly valid and defensible aspects of your philosophy of teaching that grades should not exist. That's a perfectly commendable and respectable position. But you can't really just say that in a teaching philosophy statement, because most institutions are going to say, well, you need to assign grades. So if you're going to talk about grades, you teach policy statement, you better explain how your ideas fit into the institutional expectations.

BC: Yes. Yes. And that goes back to keeping your audience in mind. And that's not just the search committee, that's the mission of the college or university or wherever you're applying to. And so you can be bold, but you better be prepared to be deal with the consequences of whatever you say in your philosophy.

CR: So let's, let's make this a little bit more concrete now. And just in terms of the consultation work, students come, come to you and your consultants looking for help with their teaching philosophy statements. What do you see are some of the things that are maybe the common obstacles or problems in these that are kind of easy to just right the ship.

BC: So some of the easiest things I would say might seem small, but things like word, word choice and being economical with your wording, are things that if you just go through with a fine tooth comb, those are very impactful things that you can change. So things like you don't need all these long adverbial phrases and this wordiness, you have a very short amount of space, small amount of space to say a lot. So get rid of those things. Things like as well gushy language, like it was an honor to have had the opportunity to lead this group. Just say I lead because it's not some miraculous like miraculous honor, that you got to do that. It's your job and you were qualified and that's what you did. So avoiding language like that can also strengthen your statement. Then another thing is to avoid vague language. So you were talking about buzzwords earlier. So ask yourself, is there, I would ask

myself, is there any professor who would disagree with what I'm saying? So if, if all of my paragraphs are saying vague things like I want to foster understanding or I want to, I want students to engage with the material. I don't think any, every other person is going to agree with that. So get away from that vague language or things that might not mean anything like critical thinking and kind of dive deeper. And so being aware of those things, those are some of the easier fixes. I think.

CR: Some of that comes down to the right or the skill.

BC: Yes.

CR: You put in adverbs so that you have the satisfaction of taking them out and knowing you don't [inaudible] you put them in because they feel right in the moment when you're writing them and then you have to learn to love the backspace button on those.

BC: Yes.

CR: It Really does. You're trying to communicate ideas and adverbs and adjectives stand between the ideas and your reader. They form a kind of a screen.

BC: And I would also say, and this is for every type of writing that I see, people are very attached to what they've written and they hate cutting things. And at the end of the day, writing is a generative process. So as you write, you're coming to the ideas that you're actually trying to say. And so it's okay to get rid of some of the stuff that's in your first early draft because it, No, it's served its purpose to develop those ideas. And now you need to get rid of it because your reader doesn't need to see that. They need to see that, that final, the good nuggets of what you're actually trying to say. So yes, the simple things like word choice, those actually make a huge difference holistically, even though it seems minor.

CR: Do you think there's any difference in the discipline that the writer is coming from. I think I'm going to kind of lead you on this but You can totally disagree--because I've been asked to give feedback on several graduate students teaching philosophy statement. And I think that I've seen more problems with the gushy language from STEM folks. And I don't know if it's because they're just like really excited to voice something for once, you know the discipline really denies than that. And papers, you know, more of cold analytic style of writing. I have a very small sample to put the blame on....

BC: Yes, I wonder if part of that is just because sadly, I think a lot of STEM programs don't emphasize writing enough, and so they just don't talk about writing and what needs to happen. Whereas in a field like English, we talk about it constantly. And so we know when it's appropriate to use maybe gushy your language versus to just stay the course. But I don't, I think a lot of it too is the individual writer. I've seen some excellent STEM writers who, just, because they're used to writing lab reports and things like that, they just get right down to it. I think it's also probably based on the individual. And I also would say that even reading models, so e.g. there's a model that we have in the GWC that is from a poetry professor. And so she includes like a couple of lines of poetry in the beginning and brings it back to that at the end. So things like that I don't necessarily think are gushy, but they certainly wouldn't be appropriate in some other settings. It's very content related, very people in that discipline would think that's great, whereas in others that would be little taboo, I would say.

CR: So if you folks come to you and your consultants with particular questions in mind for problems that they are noticing in their in their documents? Or did they just say, help me? Do they know enough of what to ask?

BC: That's a great question and I think the answer is no. Oftentimes they'll come with complete drafts. And really what they want to know is, did I do this right? What are they looking for? And they often ask first, like, I didn't really know where to start. So those brainstorming questions that I mentioned earlier are what I point them to before they tried to do that. But also they ask like, how do I organize this? There's, unless you've been told, there's really not a clear expectation. But what I would say to that if we're getting down to the nitty-gritty, I would say, think about it in terms of you have this intro that you really need to attract the committee with. At the end of that intro, you need a very clear what we would think of as a thesis statement. That is a very clear statement of what drives my teaching. This is what I believe teaching is or should be. And then every paragraph after that needs to tie back to that statement. It needs a clear topic sentence that then connects overall. And within those paragraphs, you need very specific evidence. And when I say specific evidence, I'm talking not just the vague... So for a lot of literature, ones, e.g. people will say things like, I strive to create a student centered classroom by using discussion groups to talk about the readings in each of my classes. That's great, but so do all 200 other applicants in literature fields. So don't just tell me you use discussion. Tell me what are they reading, what kinds of questions are you asking them to think about? You can give examples of those questions. What kinds of insights do they tend to walk away with as students? So really getting into those examples, that's another question that students ask. If they know enough about teaching philosophy, they'll ask in my specific enough? usually the answer is no. And so then what we get to do or what my consultants get to do really is to then ask, like, talk to them about their teaching. Like, Well, tell me about what's your favorite lesson that you teach or what stands out to you in your course. And then usually they'll tell us these are really rich stories that are not in their philosophy and they need to be on because that's what's going to make them stand out from the other applicants.

CR: On the other hand, I think also helping the writers of these documents have some empathy for the readers of the document. Because we're especially now where the situation is higher in higher ed, there are hundreds of applicants for some of these. Increasingly, they're asking for teaching philosophy statements at the front end of it, not like second or third round, but at front end. So do you really think that the committee is reading carefully 200-some documents? They're probably skimming them. Okay, that is just the reality of it. The better your organization is, the tighter your writing is, the easier it is to see what your thesis statement is, and the more grabbing them, the more hooking it, yes. All the better, right?

BC: Yes.

CR: You say like that whole stand out part of it. So I think James Lane wrote somewhere like, the worst thing about teaching philosophy statements is there so forgettable? Yes. So that's when it comes down to. Tell me a story, right?

BC: Yes. Yes, this is a place you can have narrative. You can do some fun things where you link your intro to your conclusion and use various specific examples. There's just a lot, there is a lot of room for creativity within, while still being kind to your reader like you said. So use your topic sentences to really drive home. What is this paragraph about? How is it different from my other paragraphs? Like what is specific about this paragraph that I want you to know about how I teach and make it easy for them to look at the first sentence and see if it's worth reading.

CR: So you, as the writer of this document, you can go into that mode. And if you haven't experienced reading ingredients, students develop that empathetic.... Okay, well, I know that the ones that are easy to read and assess are the ones that have these qualities--Topic, sentence, organization,

BC: We love the students.

CR: Exactly. Is there anything else that comes to mind with the more difficult aspects of teaching philosophy statements, the dangers of how to correct. That's probably not the right word.

BC: Well, I don't know that I have any great on the spot advice for this, but I did mentioned it earlier. Having a cohesive teaching and research identity, I think is important. And sometimes it can be hard to do without overstating it. I think that's something to think about. I think making your statement cohesive without repeating yourself is really difficult. So I think back I recently, in prepping for this, found my first draft of my teaching philosophy—it was so horrible. And basically because all the things, all the things that I was just saying about being vague and, you know, not having strong topic sentences that actually say something different than your other paragraphs. Basically, I was just saying the same thing over and over again with a different example in each paragraph. But it's very, you want to show different aspects of your teaching beliefs and how those come together. And so I think being very aware of what is this paragraph saying that is new that I have not yet said. How does that help them understand me as a teacher More? That's something I would say. And then I think we really covered. I was going to bring up being specific with examples can be difficult if you don't have a lot of teaching experience. So again, being aware of what can I draw on? If you don't have a lot of experience, you can you can be honest about that without really being too vulnerable. Being like, I'm not really I don't really know what I'm doing, but I would hope that I can do XYZ. I wouldn't quite say it like that. I would try to capitalize on what you do know. Emphasize that.

CR: When I speak with graduate students in their teaching seminars across campus, One of the things that I do is I say, okay, you've all got your computers open or a phone. I want you to create a document right now and call it teaching examples. I just wait and wait for them to do it. And I say, okay, now you have a document that whenever something cool or interesting, successful, or wildly unsuccessful happens in teaching that you experienced as a teacher or a student as a, as a TA. Write it down. Because if you tried to write the teaching philosophy statement and then try to think of examples like just cold out of the blue. You're not gonna have as rich details and you're going to forget, you got to forget some really interesting things that happened. And you're just in general, having really good examples. You won't end up using nine-tenths of them, but just having them there when you do that.

BC: That's a good point too about as a student. So that's another way to kind of make up for any lack of experience is we've been students for a long time at this point. And so you've experienced a wide range as a grad students. So think about that as well.

CR: Yeah, that is an aspect of that sort of cuts both ways because one of the things that I tell those two is that you have to remember that you are, unlike most of the students you will teach. You, care about this material way more and you know way more. So what worked for you as a student might not be the best roadmap to teach the whole, right?

BC: Yes.

CR: The mythical average student or the struggling student for sure, the struggling students. And so you have to sort of filter through if you're thinking about using your own learning experiences as a

model for how do people learn. You have to remember like I am, I am unlike most students. But just by virtue of the fact that you are now in grad school and you're thinking about, you know, the professor and all those sorts of things,

BC: That self-awareness is always a good thing.

CR: Yes. Absolutely, yes. You think there's any discipline specific advice for writing? Does that mean we can't we can't really trying to transcend our own disciplinary backgrounds and training. You're coming from English and I coming from religion. But what advice do you give for folks when it comes to sort of relating the discipline to the teaching philosophy statement, how should it be? How might it be sufficiently different for an enligh person, etc.

BC: I think so much of that, again, depends on the the committee. What kind of position you're applying to? Is it more generalist? Is it interdisciplinary? What kind of position is it? But I do think somehow showing that you're thinking about teaching and we've talked about this in relation to your discipline because you don't teach writing the same way you teach math, and you don't teach biology the same way you teach religion courses. So being aware of that and showing your committee that you are aware of that I think is important and our, our consultants shameless plug in the graduate writing center. We are from a variety of disciplines and so we try to match people with consultants from at least adjacent disciplines. So that like you just said, we will never be experts in STEM fields or things like that. But having someone from that field that can relate, Who can relate is gonna be really helpful as well.

CR: Some of that will take care of itself to some degree. Two, if you're serious about your example, yes. Show very concrete discipline embedded versions of Well, what does it mean to do the critical thinking stuff in your discipline?

BC: Yes.

CR: The show don't tell.

BC: Yes. Our lovely cliché of show don't tell that we've talked about and all of her writing courses, yes.

CR: You were starting to allude to this, but let's talk a little bit about the teaching philosophy statement in relation to the other documents that someone applying for a job might be asked to produce. So of course a cover letter, a CV, a research agenda. There is, We have to think about the genre of each of those documents, but also know that they're coming to...

BC: I think they need to dovetail but not overlap. So again, each of these documents and faith statements and diversity statements, they're all very limited in scope and length. And so you have precious space and each of them to accomplish what you're trying to accomplish. So don't waste that reiterating what you've already said. But at the same time, if you have this really strong diversity statement, but none of that is reflected in your actual teaching practices. They're going to say, well, wait a minute. It is she actually serious about what she's saying in these other statements? I think an awareness that it actually relieves some pressure in terms of you don't have to say it all Again. You can well, to some extent, hopefully trust that they've looked at the others. But I do think not--having it reflect those documents but not repeating yourself is really key. What would you say that?

CR: I think the cohesiveness is Probably the way that I would approach it. I think. As you said clearly, if if, if you have all of this wonderful aspirational language in your diversity statement, but it doesn't,

it doesn't play out at all in your teaching philosophy than, than a buffered reader would go. These things are, one of these things is not true.

BC: Exactly, which is not a good thing to have during a job applications.

CR: So just think about, you're trying to give search committee a robust picture of who you are in all of those aspects of--in faculty life usually talk about three-legged stool. The teaching, research and service part--and its also about institutional fit and collegiality. Just the accountability to other folks in their institution and that sort of thing. So you want your all of your documents to say those--to get those three things. But in a way that they can see that one individual, one cohesive individually is to mean all of those things...hold those thoughts rather than three different individuals.

BC: So one identity but different aspects of that identity? Yes. Exactly.

CR: Yeah. So any thoughts about how institution type or four position type. So again, back to audience. Thinking about institutions. There are so many different categories. You have faith-based versus secular, public versus private teaching or research focused whether you're at a, you're applying to a small liberal arts college or an R1 huge university. I think that partly, I mean, it very much influences the language, but also the content. So if you're applying to a small liberal, liberal arts college, um, you can emphasize small group discussion based classes versus if you're applying to a giant university where you might be teaching courses that are 60 students to hundreds of students. You need to be thinking about how you're portraying your ability to do that. And that's not to say that your experience can't translate--because I've never taught a class of 60. But I need to be thinking about conveying to them that what I have done will be applicable and I can translate that to that situation. Things like the faith-based versus secular institution. If you're going to a secular institution or applying, you're probably not going to want to spend a whole paragraph talking about how you pray before classes to encourage students, mentorship, that kind of thing. So I would just think about how they're going to take whatever you're saying and if it's fitting in again with their mission. So again, this was with any job application materials you need to do your work to know what school you're applying to. Know their mission. Look on their website, look at all of their statements and values, and make sure that they could look at your documents and say this would fit.

CR: Well. Any final advice or things that you would just put in people's ears as there and working on on these documents.

BC: Come to the Writing Center, the graduate writing center we have you can sign up for an appointment on our website and we'll contact you and you'll be paired with an advanced doctoral students to work with you on your documents.

CR: So I would say that's not just plug that's also reiterating this is a process.

BC: Yes.

CR: Go through many iterations. At the end you will probably have many versions of this.

BC: Yes.

CR: They will send depending on institutions and institutional type for feedback. The more constructive comments. Yes, seeing a first version of a teaching philosophy versus the one that students send out is really cool. It's very rewarding. It's like, okay, we did good work. And if you can

develop and let go of the things that you really wanted to incorporate that might not work. It will serve you well.

CR: Alright. Thank you so much for joining us today.

BC: Thanks.