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John A. Huss  
Northern Kentucky University

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## Using Constructivist Teaching to Shift the Paradigm for Pre-Service Philosophy of Education Statements

**John A. Huss**

Northern Kentucky University

### Abstract

This article examines what the author perceives as a need to fortify the quality of philosophy of education statements submitted by pre-service teaching candidates. Because the educational philosophy is frequently viewed as “artificial,” it fails to provide a systematic, meaningful, and articulate guideline for new teachers whose underlying beliefs ultimately dominate and shape their instructional practices. Paramount is a return to the underlying premise that a teacher’s philosophy of education is, foremost, *personal* and reflective. Candidates must share in the decision-making process and be engaged in their *own* construction of a philosophy of education. Otherwise, teachers in training find it challenging to discriminate theory and practice in authentic classroom settings. By focusing their attention on direct, cogent elements of the philosophy statement and by actively participating in the formal educational philosophies, candidates can discover a congruency between what they envision as their role in the classroom and how that role will impact what they teach, how they teach it, and how they assess.

### The Current Role of the Philosophy Statement

The task of writing a philosophy of education statement is both standard fare and a rite of passage for nearly all undergraduate pre-service teaching candidates. Having taught educational foundations as part of my introductory education course for several years, I became increasingly dismayed with the quality of the philosophy of education papers submitted by my pre-service teachers- in-training. I found the majority of their handiwork to be tortuous expositions and almost humorous examples of “false advertising” as students unabashedly espoused practices for which they held only superficial allegiance or possessed minimal understanding. While many instructors admittedly do an inspired job of leading students through the philosophy of education process, others, like myself, express wariness with the procedure and actively seek ways to improve the caliber of student output and make the experience more impactful for candidates even as they embark on their new careers.

So, I began to earnestly question the overall value of the philosophy statement for my students and vowed to transform the way I viewed it and presented it to them. I wanted to move it from “checklist,” “requisite portfolio entry” and “reflection on demand” to a type of honest, contemplative disclosure that many feel is beyond the capacity of beginner teachers. Quite simply I wanted to involve students in the decision-making process and have them engage in their *own* construction of a philosophy of education.

We promote the philosophy statement as a reflective piece, designed to validate ideals and serve as an impetus to professional development and revision when practice challenges

theory. Fernstermacher and Soltis (1992) insist that what a teacher *thinks* about teaching determines the individual's style of teaching. For most, however, the educational philosophy is a mechanical, and often disingenuous, rambling of disconnected ideas that fails to acknowledge the learner's previous constructions about education and teaching. Because novice teachers frequently perceive the educational philosophy requirement as "artificial," it fails to provide a systematic, meaningful, and articulate guideline for future teachers whose underlying beliefs ultimately dominate and shape their instructional practices.

### *Reasons for Disconnection*

I assert there are a couple of glaring reasons why educational philosophy papers are often nothing more than cookie-cutter templates in which students merely frontload the futile exercise with over-generalized statements from hall-of-fame theorists, and finish the carnage with banal buzz phrases. First, many inaugural philosophies are written soon after admission into a teacher preparation program. Thus, the typical neophyte is attempting to create a product based largely on mere factual dissemination from a limited cadre of instructors. Regrettably, many professors are hesitant to acknowledge the learner as an active agent who is capable of engaging in his/her own knowledge construction by integrating new information into his/her schema, and by associating and representing it in a meaningful way. As a consequence, the student quickly ascertains that certain ideas are overtly transmitted and, in a valiant attempt to please and pass, simply regurgitates someone else's meaning.

Few grade-conscious aspirants are going to deliberately embrace philosophies held in disdain, or given short shrift, by their instructors. For these student chameleons, the philosophy statements they write are wobbly and incoherent because they are not authoring their own creation, but merely parroting the beliefs of their superiors. For example, pre-service candidates intrigued with a "back to basics" orientation are reminded such an approach is "too traditional" or "too Euro-centric" while candidates captivated with existentialist views of self-actualization and self-realization are quickly told that such pursuits in the modern P-12 classroom are unattainable, bizarre, and akin to fantasy (i.e. the material is intriguing to discuss, but does not transfer well into practice). The message eventually becomes clear: I don't *really* want your philosophy of education; I want the philosophy of education. Thus, the philosophy statements exude an eerie sameness and become prescriptive, formatted, insincere, and worthless.

The second deficiency with philosophy of education papers can be found, unfortunately, in a prevailing disconnect between many of the principles learned in the college classroom and the stark reality of the neighborhood school. For pre-service teachers who are in accord with a belief that education should be a perpetually enriching process of ongoing growth relevant to a child's interests, they soon become confused and disillusioned when so few of the promising practices espoused on their campus actually take place in the classrooms where they complete their practica. The challenge of locating field-based placements that *truly* provide opportunities for experiential learning is daunting indeed; hence, the duty of enthusiastically composing a philosophy of education suddenly mimics the writing of fiction when students become painfully aware they see more worksheets, textbooks, overhead projectors, and inanimate supervisors than critical thinking, project-based

learning, hands-on cooperative ventures, and “guides on the side.” They become hesitant to build their philosophies around concepts that seem to exist in a “methods course vacuum” and begin to distinguish what they are told on campus from what they will *really* do when they get their own students. As a result, the philosophy of education becomes a classroom “assignment” written only to appease those who will read it rather than a series of thoughtful statements, born of reflective introspection, to help educators grow professionally. If these future teachers are expected to someday emulate discovery-based strategies, candidates clearly need authentic experiences in teacher education that introduce them to interdisciplinary exploration, collaborative activity, and the interpreting of new knowledge in the context of what is already known (Kaufman, 1996; Kroll & LaBosky, 1996).

Assuring the time-honored philosophy of education statement regains, or retains, any semblance of authenticity as a relevant endeavor that defines classroom goals and increases emotional investment in teaching takes a concerted commitment from the professors who require them and the students who actually compose them. Paramount is a return to the underlying premise that a teacher’s philosophy of education is, foremost, *personal* and reflective. If the candidate believes he/she must obediently echo a list of “name your jargon” keywords and simply repeat what the instructor or school administrator wants to hear, the effort will be devoid of substance. We may as well drop the pretense, desist with the reflective ostentation, and coach our pre-service candidates on the desired power phrases to splice into the final copy, and the script they should follow in order to complete the course, proceed through the program, and attain employment. Far too many “on cue” philosophy statements are clearly manufactured for a specific audience and reveal little about the individual’s ingenerate core of educational precepts. Our teaching candidates must own their philosophy statements. We cannot tell pre-service teachers “Your philosophy comes from the heart” and then say, “Make sure you talk about global awareness.” Students must be allowed to construct their own beliefs about teaching.

### *Preparing Students to Reflect*

Because teachers often teach in the same manner *they* tend to learn, I begin my direction with the use of personal inventories to assist students in recognizing their own dominant intelligences and learning preferences or styles, so they become more cognizant of the manner in which they take in, organize, and make sense of information. Students come to recognize that instructors’ decisions about education can be deeply grounded in their own previous classroom experiences and that taking a single approach to the art of teaching that unnecessarily leaves out other approaches is likely to exclude some students from opportunities to learn. By doing so, I seek to emphasize what Gredler (1997) considers an often-overlooked element of knowledge acquisition: the background and culture of the learner.

Consequently, receiving a balanced introduction to each of the formal educational philosophies is certainly a fundamental requirement for any pre-service candidate because such exposure provides theoretical underpinnings for their personal beliefs and affirms that others likewise share in these tenets. I now work diligently to not only *present* each formal philosophy, from essentialism to existentialism, with equal vigor and thoroughness, but to

*model* each as well. As Amobi (2003) asserts, “As we teach preservice and inservice teachers to reflect in action, on action and for action, it behooves us to model these processes and nuances of reflection to our students” (p. 31). Such modeling serves to compensate for some of the practices they do not see in their field placements and allows candidates to draw their own conclusions as to the utility, for themselves, of the various ideas we cover. Such an approach is also consistent with the ideas of Jonassen (1991) when he stresses conceptual interrelatedness and providing multiple representations or perspectives on the content.

My students and I explore the core knowledge curriculum championed by E.D. Hirsch and discuss the benefits and disadvantages of his dictionary of cultural literacy. We debate the value in memorizing multiplication tables, phonetically interpreting ordinary spelling, reciting state capitals, or recognizing the idioms embedded in our folklore. We address the charge that graduating high school seniors cannot identify countries on a map or the number of senators from a state.

We then participate in activities to illustrate the pragmatic “teacher as facilitator” orientation of progressivism wherein students take responsibility for learning material and drawing conclusions. For example, I ask my candidates to work in small groups to determine the uses for unnamed colonial-era tools, piecing together the functions of these common implements through conceptualizing, analyzing, and reaching consensus. Next, after interacting with the descriptions of 12 initial survivors of a nuclear attack, we seek to determine which *six* individuals would offer the most benefits to society if they were allowed to remain in a shelter with limited resources and thereby survive the catastrophe. We further engage in cooperative learning structures and underscore the need for positive interdependence and face-to-face interaction. We delve into the predicaments of assigning “group grades” and scoring questions for which multiple responses are considered “correct.” In short, the “educating the whole child” mantra is introduced as something more than a hokum phrase that sounds good but means little.

In another session, Socratic questioning is the focal point as students recognize thinking has assumptions, makes claims, creates meaning, and has implications and consequences. We role-play the categories of questions a Socratic teacher might initiate to expose the logic of thought (questions of clarification, questions that probe assumptions, questions that probe reasons and evidence, questions about viewpoints or perspectives, and so forth). Paideia techniques of intellectual coaching and seminar dialoguing are subsequently illustrated and critiqued by students. Some candidates in my class gravitate immediately toward the “mind disciplining” aspects of perennialism while others are literally mortified and annoyed by the barrage of interrogative input.

When we emphasize social reconstructionism we consider community-based learning and the value of students spending time in their neighborhoods becoming absorbed in local problems. We work off of an example of middle school students wishing to clean up a vacant lot and convert it to a playground. As a class we consider how the various content areas can be taught and intertwined throughout the process of cultivating the vacant lot project (writing business letters to city council, using oral communication skills to present ideas to council, relying on mathematics to measure the square footage of the lot and figure costs, etc.). To

address other aspects of social reconstructionism we also scrutinize middle and high school textbooks for omissions of marginalized groups. We preview stories from diverse children's and young adult authors and participate in simulations to demonstrate racism, sexism, and classism.

With existentialism we confront A.S. Neill's *Summerhill* and its contemporary incarnation, the Sudbury Model, in which the role of teacher becomes one of a "helper" who serves as a resource to youngsters chasing their own freedoms and individuality. Is existentialism a companion of anarchy? How far can individualized education be stretched? Candidates seek to somehow devise an unlikely merge of non-compulsory lessons and student self-governance with an educational system that is indubitably mass-produced.

### *The Key Questions*

By immersing pre-service teachers in the formal educational philosophies through reading, conversation, and active engagement, they recognize the practical applicability of the various theories for the elementary, middle, and secondary environments. They feel safe in choosing the philosophy and philosophers that connect with their own sensibilities toward teaching and learning. The ideas become palatable and intimate rather than stodgy, recondite blather in their textbook or inaccessible discourses from ultra-cerebral supplemental readings. While admittedly time consuming, the benefits have gradually manifested through student choices that are well informed and confident as opposed to tentative and rootless.

Without a lodestar, the undertaking can admittedly become quite convoluted and meandering, so the next strategy I use to assist students in developing their philosophy of education is to streamline the process by placing them into groups for the purpose of exploring five simple and direct questions. Consistent with a constructivist paradigm, such social interaction is fundamentally important for learning because higher mental functions such as reasoning, comprehension, and critical thinking originate in social interactions and are then internalized by individuals. The first question to be addressed is: What *is* the role of the teacher? I tell my students, "Close your eyes and picture yourself in your classroom. What do you see yourself doing and what do you perceive as your function in that classroom?" Candidates see themselves as everything from "providers" to "guiders." I implore the students to be candid. There is little value in declaring oneself a "coordinator" and "facilitator" if, in essence, one is picturing oneself flipping transparencies covered with class notes or machine-grading objective midterm examinations. A teacher who considers him/herself a "manager" will likely be unhappy--and unsuccessful-- with Montessori or Reggio Emilia approaches just as a teacher who wants to promote values clarification in the classroom will be unfulfilled listing Civil War generals.

We move to the second key question: What do *I* think should be taught? The response will have no legitimacy whatsoever unless the student feels comfortable enough to truthfully answer it. The candidate must consider whether he/she supports a mere transference of facts or wishes to accentuate critical thinking, the acquisition of life-long learning skills to function effectively in an information economy, or the development of problem-solving strategies. Obviously not everyone agrees as to "what should be taught" or we would not have

classrooms at all ends of the spectrum when it comes to dispensing knowledge. We would not have some teachers who read children's essays for "meaning" and others who are maniacal about grammar and mechanics. We would not have "conventional" American history teachers and those who foster a "multi-perspective" approach. What a professional teacher ultimately does with a district curriculum is bore upon by what that teacher inwardly thinks is important. Some items will always stay and some items will always go.

The third question deals with delivery: How do *I* think content should be taught? Candidates explain those specific strategies, techniques and exercises they support for achieving their teaching objectives. Again, forthrightness is imperative. Merely saying "hands-on activities" and "group projects" is vague and, for many candidates, deluding. It is not uncommon to find a teacher, professing *on paper* to advance decision-making skills, relying on fact-driven commercial worksheets provided by a textbook manufacturer. So, candidates need to be realistic about the manner in which they are most inclined to administer their curriculum.

The fourth question addresses assessment and evaluation: How do *I* measure the effectiveness of my instruction? Candidates, for example, will explain if they favor ability-based or performance-based assessments. Does a student envision true/false, completion, and matching, or does a candidate believe in holistic scoring, authentic assessment, and culminating group projects? Is the teacher looking for mastery or developmental growth? Again, one should see a consistent thread running throughout the philosophy. Assessment should match objectives and the methodologies should support both.

Finally, I ask candidates to consider: What is the role for *my* students? Candidates typically say, "I want the students to have an active role in my classroom" and then turn around and organize desks in traditional rows and proceed to show videos three days a week. Candidates must realize teachers have different comfort zones and expectations for student participation. Some teachers are comfortable only with a decorous, organized classroom structure while others thrive on "productive noise" and the bustle of a humming classroom in motion. An authoritarian who places firm controls and limits on students should not masquerade as a laissez-faire teacher who readily accepts student impulses because it will not take administrators, colleagues, and children long to uncover the charade. To complete the philosophy, candidates seek strategic points at which to support their beliefs with pertinent quotes by educational leaders, curriculum theorists, and philosophers, who share their approaches and views toward education, teaching, and/or learning.

### *The Pay Off*

I am continually striving in my course to see the philosophy of education become a much more usable and reliable piece of reflective writing for pre-service teachers than the existing version, which has notoriously been a predictable "say the right things and call it a day" *non*-reflective piece of writing. I have, in fact, witnessed notable advancements in the overall quality of these statements since I began to meticulously cover each philosophy in a comprehensive, uncolored, and proportionate manner and since I began to allow students to

construct their own philosophies rather than obediently reproduce mine. Giving students a dictate without giving them sufficient tools to meet the challenge is unmerited.

My students now go beyond “stock” phrases and are better able to record their beliefs in clear, action-oriented terms that assist them in navigating through the everyday realities of the classrooms they encounter and will soon lead. They have a better link to conceptual frameworks that are palatable and demystified. Fewer students are turning in overly rehearsed, decontextualized submissions that speak to everyone’s philosophy but their own. By focusing their attention on direct, cogent elements of the philosophy statement, candidates are discovering a congruency between what they envision as their role in the classroom and how that role will impact what they teach, how they teach it, how they assess it, and what the P-12 students are doing after the bus delivers them to their door. They are better able to likewise discern the philosophies of *other* teachers through mere observation, viewing them within a context of practice, or as Amobi (2003) describes, discriminating that “educational beliefs and practice are symbiotically connected” (p.31).

For a philosophy of education to be a vehicle for reflection it must cease to be a vehicle for placating instructors and employers. True reflection involves identifying strengths and weaknesses in one’s own performance and determining professional development activities to improve that performance. We learn from those experiences we ponder, explore, review, and question. Many teachers, unfortunately, fail to align their educational beliefs and classroom practices and are ultimately mis-matched in their daily school environments. According to Ayers (1993), “the learning environment is a complex, *living* reflection of a teacher’s values” (p.50). As instructors we owe it to our pre-service candidates to provide scaffolding as well as a secure, open, and honest haven in which they feel free to develop their professional identities and ultimately memorialize those revelations on paper. Let us continue to endeavor to transform the philosophy of education from a languid, ill-conceived intellectual exercise into a purposeful, informed rationale for the educational choices our teachers make. In this way, teachers in training can hold up a mirror and begin the career-long process of blending and continually analyzing the art and science of good teaching practice, not for their benefit alone, but for the benefit of those youngsters who will soon be impacted by these seemingly innocuous philosophies of education.

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