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Crafting a stronger teaching statement

Erica De Bruin

The teaching statement (or teaching "philosophy") has rapidly become a required part of the job market packet for aspiring assistant professors. Of the 62 positions I applied for in political science this year, 47 requested a teaching statement or portfolio. Yet even for those who have prioritized developing their teaching skills, writing the teaching statement is no easy task.

In writing a teaching statement, the aim is to convince a search committee that you are an effective and engaging teacher whose approach to teaching fits with the institution's. This is, of course, easier said than done.

When I sat down to write my own statement, my first instinct was to start cataloguing all of the nifty instructional strategies I use in the classroom to facilitate student learning and organize the statement around these strategies (e.g., "I use group work! And peer instruction! And cater to my students diverse learning styles!").

The result was less than inspiring. For example, an early draft of my teaching statement contained the passage:

> While explaining the concept of "conditional independence" to students, I described it in words, illustrated it visually, worked through a sample few problems, and finally pointed students towards written explanations of the concept in the professor's lecture notes and in our text.

Now, these are all reasonable approaches to teaching students about conditional independence in an introductory statistics course. But my litany is dry and unmemorable -- certainly not something that would stick with a search committee member wading through hundreds of teaching statements.

I decided to follow the advice of a Teaching Center colleague, who suggested focusing on a smaller number of more detailed examples. In reading through others' teaching statements, I realized that it was these longer stories that ended up sticking with me. Consider the following excerpt from a teaching statement written by Celia Paris, a former YTC fellow and PhD Candidate in Political Science at Yale:

> I had my Introduction to American Politics students split up into four groups, with each group drafting a two-sentence explanation of the interpretation of the commerce clause in a particular Supreme Court case and then sharing it with the class. Immediately after each presentation, the case was handed over to students in another group, who had just five minutes to apply the interpretation of the commerce clause from this second case to the details of the first case. (Students who had struggled with keeping their interpretation to two sentences began to see the value in succinct communication as the room buzzed and the seconds ticked by.) After a second presentation, groups switched cases once more and used the interpretation of the commerce clause in the third case to make an argument for whether or not "Obamacare" should be considered constitutional. Not only did this activity get students engaged in interpreting multiple court cases and holding each other accountable for explaining the material effectively, but by the end students

> were startled and intrigued by the variety they saw in interpretations of the Commerce Clause.

There are three aspects of this anecdote that I found particularly effective in showcasing Celia's teaching. (Her full statement can be found here). First, the writing is vivid (the classroom "buzzed," the seconds "ticked by"). Second, the story is discipline-specific. Celia provides enough detail that another political scientist is likely to understand the context of the assignment. Finally, it is student-centered. Throughout, the emphasis is on what students were doing, how they reacted to the assignment (they "struggled," "began to see value," "were startled and intrigued"). Framing the story in this also way allowed Celia to connect the activity to specific learning goals ("interpreting multiple court cases and holding each other accountable for explaining the material").

With these considerations in mind, I took another stab at it the statement. I began by thinking back to class meetings in which the discussion was particularly animated or I tried a new activity and thought it paid off, or times when I got particularly positive feedback from a student. For each, I wrote down both what I did and how the students responded. I also made sure to set the stage by including details about the topic or readings under discussion.

In the end, I had a set of short, colorful stories that (I think!) better advertise my strengths as a teacher. For example, to illustrate how I incorporate students' prior knowledge in my classrooms, I included the following vignette in my revised statement:

> In a recent seminar on the causes of civil war, I began by asking students to spend a minute jotting down whether there had been a civil war in their country of origin or current residence, and if so, what they thought caused it. Students were shocked at the sheer number of different causes they identified, as well as the extent of disagreement they had over conflicts many knew a great deal about, such as the U.S. Civil War. I used these observations to set up a lively discussion about what we, as social scientists, mean when we say that one thing causes another.

And in demonstrating the utility of peer learning, I offered this anecdote:

> In teaching a seminar on emerging security challenges in Central Asia, for instance, I broke students into small groups and had them research the answers to a short series of questions about the politics, economics, and demographics of a particular country in the region. They input their responses into a Google Document that became a shared resource for the class. In subsequent discussions, students were able to bring their country-specific knowledge to bear on questions ranging from the role of Islam in the region to the prospects for political reform, successfully avoiding the kind of broad generalizations about the region that had plagued prior discussions. They also clearly relished the opportunity to become an expert on their adopted country (one exclaimed after the seminar concluded that it had been "seriously the best seminar ever!").