

Higher Teacher Education: Raising Awareness toward Constructing Teaching Philosophy Statements

*By Abdulghani Muthanna**

This article focuses on exploring whether teacher educators and teacher students at higher teacher education programs have constructed their teaching philosophy statements, how they implement such philosophy statements, and how they develop and evaluate the contents of the teaching materials related to the courses they are instructing. By following the qualitative case study methodology, the author employed semi-structured interviews with twenty teacher educators and fifteen teacher students from one state higher education institution in Yemen. With the employment of thematic network analysis techniques, the findings report on the lack of awareness concerning the teaching philosophy statements construction, the random process of designing and evaluating teaching materials, and the lack of teaching aids for realizing the teaching philosophies of those with developed teaching statements. For practical implementation, university leaders and administrators are recommended to establish a program that focuses on the professional development of the teaching faculty with a focus on highlighting and providing useful knowledge on the ‘teaching philosophy statements’ construction and ‘materials design and evaluation’ processes.

Keywords: teaching philosophy, teacher education, higher education, curriculum design, Yemen

Introduction

‘Teaching philosophy’ relates to the main roles of teachers in a classroom. Among many, roles such as good listening (Splitter & Sharp, 1995) and reflection (Butler, 1996) are a priority. When a teacher educator has learnt the roles they have to play with their students and achieves these roles properly, this indicates that they conceived a teaching philosophy. Teaching philosophy is simply the reflection of one’s conceptions on how teaching should be performed to achieve pre-planned goals and/or objectives.

This study is conducted at one university in the context of Yemen. It mainly focuses on answering these two research questions: a) what is your teaching philosophy and how does your program help you practice it? and b) how do you choose or develop the content of the courses you are teaching? The findings indicate a dire necessity for university leaders and programs chairpersons to highlight the importance of constructing teaching philosophy statements for teacher educators and instructing student teachers on how to construct their own.

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The article is structured into three main sections. The first section introduces the topic with a definition of the concept of 'teaching philosophy' and the constituents of the teaching philosophy statement. The second section reports on the research design while the third section reports on the study findings with a brief discussion and conclusion. Following is a definition of the teaching philosophy concept.

Defining Teaching Philosophy

Teaching is a complex activity, whether be it at basic or higher education. It demands the possession of many skills and qualities and continuous professional development. It also demands building effective relationships with colleagues, administrators and students (Turner & Morelli, 2017). At both levels of education, teachers need to construct effective teaching philosophy statements. This is more critical at higher teacher education programs that prepare teachers of different disciplines. Teacher educators, the fathers of knowledge at least in the eyes of their teacher students, must have developed clear and effective teaching philosophies that should be continuously reflected on. The quality of teaching depends on teacher educators' conceptions of teaching (McAlpine & Westin, 2000). These teaching conceptions are not arbitrarily conceived; however, they are the outcomes of uncountable experiences gained through learning, teaching, and social activities. These teaching conceptions represent one's thinking of what teaching is and how it should be achieved in different contexts. These teaching conceptions could be mentally mapped or written and developed continuously. Professional teachers continually reflect upon their teaching methods and the achievements these adopted/adapted methods could realize. Based on such continual reflections, they improve their teaching methods.

A philosophy of teaching is not static; it is dynamic and always evolves (Huggett, 1930) considering the changes and/or challenges that might occur in the teaching contexts or the overall context of education. Teachers also need to develop their own teaching goals, and this is the main part of their teaching philosophies (Huggett, 1930). Developing a statement of teaching philosophy has become a priority in some institutions as the realization of the institution's mission and vision depends on the close relations between the institution's teachers teaching philosophy statements and the institution's overall goals. It has also become a prerequisite for receiving financial supports regarding innovative educational projects (Chism, 1997-1998). Teaching philosophy reflects certain values, attitudes, beliefs and experiences teachers hold as goals to achieve in their teachings. When such concepts are not well thought of or developed with a comparison of one's own and others', the teaching action might not achieve the intended goals. Further, a teaching philosophy should be 'brief' so that the teacher can read and update their teaching philosophy at ease at any time. It should also be 'contextual' because every context is different from the other, and what might be suitable for one context, might not be so for another one. Moreover, the teaching philosophy should be 'narrative' to show clarity in how teaching goals are planned and achieved systematically (often with brief examples). Additionally, it should be

'personally reflective' because the main purpose is to help oneself develop their own teaching. Teaching philosophies also need to be "descriptions of how the teachers think learning occurs, how they think they can intervene in this process, what chief goals they have for students, and what actions they take to implement their intentions" (Chism, 1997-1998, p. 1). This demands teachers to fully apprehend their students' different learning styles and learning interests and how to appropriately address them during the teaching process. This is not easy to attain as it requires years of practice. Learning about the students' learning styles and interests (students of this year) helps teachers conceptualize how learning generally occurs. Students of next year might differ in their styles and interests and this increases teachers' knowledge about students and enlarge their first conceptualization. Year after year, teachers solidify their conceptualization of learning and their continuous reflections will solidify their teaching conceptualizations. Having clear learning and teaching conceptualizations is the trigger for conceiving an actual and appropriate teaching philosophy. However, the appropriate teaching philosophy requires effective implementation. This effective implementation also relies on internal factors such teachers' degree of self-enthusiasm and motivation; personal history; body of knowledge, or external factors such the context (staff: colleagues and administrators' thinking and support or the overall situation of higher education at one's state); presence or lack of teaching aids and facilities; culture; religion; and previous teachers. This makes teaching philosophy statements therefore differ from one context to another and differ from one instructor to another within the same context. As defined earlier, a teaching philosophy is not static; it then is relativistic because teaching/learning beliefs and practices vary from one culture and/or situation to another. To further understand the teaching philosophy concept and its development, the following is a brief discussion of what constitutes a teaching philosophy statement.

Teaching Philosophy Statement (TPS) Constituents

Teaching philosophy statements concern teacher educators' beliefs on how learning happens (Laundon, Cathcart, & Greer, 2020) and how our teaching practices and styles enable the learning activity (Beatty, Leigh, & Dean, 2020). Many teachers develop teaching philosophy statements before joining the teaching community because it is a requisite requirement for job applications (Eierman, 2008). Although scholars have different thoughts on how the TPS should be composed, it is important that the TPS should reflect the vision and mission of the institution. More specifically, the TPS should reflect the policy of the teacher's program/department. For Eierman (2008), the main constituents of the TPS are 1) teaching experience and commitment, 2) learning and teaching methods and assessment models, 3) teaching interests, and 4) summary with references (p. 338). However, what also matters more is how to perform one's TPS in the classrooms. A good performance then demands going to the teaching field with the 'spirit of critical optimism' (Shields, 2003, p. 7). Critical optimism is the concept that

relates to arousing reasonableness and confidence, and encouraging intelligence to improve specific conditions (Dewey, 1929 as cited in Shields, 2003, p. 8).

The teaching performance differs from one nation to another and varies among teachers within the same department. What might be best for one class might also be worst for another. Therefore, teachers continue reflecting upon their teaching practices with the view of a continuous development. Teachers at the higher education stage should continuously develop their TPSs because students have different backgrounds, learning styles, interests, and needs, to name a few. These TPSs can be developed through the sharing of values and attitudes of 'teaching' among colleagues. The process of sharing can be performed through the application of the teaching philosophy game (see Christiansen, Hansen, & Jensen, 2016 for details). Further, the application of a dialogic interaction approach, in which teachers interact with and consider students' own knowledge and perspectives, is useful in helping students develop their teaching philosophy statements (Merkel, 2020). Below is a brief presentation of the research design.

Research Design

In this study, the author followed the constructivist grounded theory that posits that researchers go to the field with some preconceptions derived from literature review (e.g., Charmaz, 2014a; 2014b), which is helpful in gaining further knowledge of the phenomenon under study and preparing the interview research protocol guide. Within this theory, the author employed the qualitative case study methodology that focuses on investigating the phenomenon in its natural settings (Yin, 2018).

The study is conducted at one university in Yemen. For collecting data, the author employed in-depth, face-to-face interviews that focus on exploring the teaching philosophies of participants. While the focus of both interviews (for teacher educators and teacher students) is the same, the interview guidelines for the teacher educators also deeply investigate their experiences of teaching, curriculum and materials design, and their current and future teaching practices.

The study participants are 20 teacher educators and 15 teacher students from one state university in Yemen. Further, all participants are selected from the Faculty of Education that contains many different teacher education programs. Such programs are established with the main idea of preparing and qualifying students to become teachers of different subjects at schools. The criteria for selecting the teacher educators relate to having Ph.D. qualifications with at least three years of teaching experience in higher teacher education programs. Concerning selection criteria of the teacher student participants, they are in the last semester of their studies, and are therefore considered as qualified teachers who would serve at basic and/or secondary education. Further, the teacher student participants of this study are the top students of their programs.

For research ethical (protection) considerations, the author assured the participants that their identities are completely anonymous for research ethical protection. This encouraged them to reflect upon their learning and teaching

experiences and thoughts freely. The interviews were conducted after obtaining a consent form signed by participants. The author interviewed the participants at the university; however, some teacher educators were interviewed at their homes. For the teacher educator participants, each interview lasted for around one hour. However, each interview for teacher students lasted for half an hour at maximum.

All face-to-face interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in verbatim for the sake of further interpretational analyses (Muthanna, 2019). The author followed a thematic network analysis that is "simply a way of organizing a thematic analysis of qualitative data to unearth the themes salient in a text at different levels, and ... aim[s] to facilitate the structuring and depiction of these themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 387). In this thematic network analysis, the author employed "(a) the reduction or breakdown of the text; (b) the exploration of the text; and (c) the integration of the exploration" (see Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 390 for details). The application of these thematic network analysis techniques led to the emergence of the following interrelated themes across all participants.

Results

The following are the main themes emerging from the data.

Awareness toward Constructing Teaching Philosophy Statements

Most of the teacher educator participants at higher teacher education programs have not yet developed teaching philosophies although they have been teaching at higher education institutions for several years. When the participants were asked about their teaching philosophy statements, fifteen teacher educators kept silent for a while and after explaining the researcher's own teaching philosophy, they started to compose and tell their own. This indicates that it is the first time for such teacher educators to hear such an educational concept. This is massively tragic as such teacher educators must have learnt about such concepts at either their undergraduate, graduate or post graduate programs. It is also very dangerous that they have been teaching at teacher education programs for several years without constructing teaching philosophies they intend to practice while performing the teaching activity. Revealing the absence of teaching philosophies among teaching staff at teacher education programs is a dangerous problem because a teaching philosophy is supposed to show the teacher what teaching is and what they want to achieve from such an activity. It is also the basis on which teachers can decide which teaching materials, teaching strategies and/or teaching aids are effective and sufficient in achieving the objectives of teaching.

The presence of such a dangerous problem is the aftermath of many factors. The first factor is related to the interest of many teacher educators in joining other colleges or programs than teacher education. But due to family's weak financial income as well as the nepotism in recruiting candidates in all programs in Yemen, they had no choice except joining teacher education programs in their own cities. In this concern, Teacher Educator 1 stated the following:

I enrolled in the Faculty of Education for specific reasons: employment is related with education faculty ... it is not a matter of interest but due to conditions at that time. Then interest developed and became a necessity.

This is concerned with employment preference and the poor conditions families went through. Becoming a teacher is a source of income for the whole family. So, becoming a teacher was obligatory to stand by one's family. Sharing the same feeling, Teacher Educator 2 made the following statement:

After high school, I lost three years, only one year left for my certificate. I had a military interest [joining a military college] and I wish I could go in that direction ... as the chance was limited; there was no choice except joining the faculty of education wherein registration was going on.

In Yemen, there is a law concerning the entrance to higher education. The certificate of high school is valid for only four years; otherwise, a student cannot be admitted into university (Ministry of Higher Studies and Scientific Research, 2008). Being unable to realize one's educational interest, one option, according to the study participants, is joining a teacher education program as the admission grades are not competitive compared with other hard science programs. Studying for four years at a teacher education program is better than joining it as a teaching staff without prior knowledge. Further, to be appointed as a teaching faculty at a teacher education program and start higher studies in other programs is problematic and leads to having less interest in the teaching profession. In this regard, Teacher Educator 7 reported:

I was reluctant to choose this program. I was interested in studying chemistry. I studied chemistry in the Faculty of Education and then made a two-year license in the Faculty of Science because I cannot get appointed in the program unless I am a graduate of science program. But a chance appeared and there was a job announced in the Educational Technology Teacher Education Program and I got appointed there in 2001. But I continued my higher studies in curriculum and teaching methodologies.

Teacher Educator 7 spent six years in earning master and doctoral degrees in curriculum and teaching methodologies. Further, he is the chairperson of a teacher education program. However, when the author interviewed this chairperson and inquired about his teaching philosophy, the participant indicated a lack of knowledge about the concept of teaching philosophy. According to him, the main reason behind such lack of knowledge relates to his being unexposed to such concept during his studies. It is dangerous to find that the program chairperson is not aware of constructing a teaching philosophy statement. This raises inquiries on how the program is administered, how other teachers are working and how students would benefit and learn about constructing teaching philosophy statements.

The absence of interest in joining such teacher education programs has led to the absence of teaching philosophies for such teacher educators who have obtained Ph.D. qualifications in their specialty areas. This has a direct effect on teacher students. All interviewed teacher student participants showed a surprising attitude

when they were asked about their teaching philosophy statements. Even after the author's demonstration of his teaching philosophy with examples, it still was problematic for them to demonstrate their own since they have not yet developed any. This is related to the teacher educators' lack of awareness towards constructing teaching statements and making their students be aware of such teaching conception.

Another reason is associated with the complete freedom teacher educators exercise in their teachings; universities in Yemen lack a system for evaluating the effectiveness of teaching. Further, there is no appointed committee for evaluating/assessing how teachers instruct students at the teaching classrooms. Moreover, there is no committee for evaluating and developing the current curricula (Muthanna, 2011; 2016). In short, this random teaching and the inspection system absence at higher education resulted in teacher educators' negligence/unawareness towards such important educational concept 'teaching philosophy' and/or the high significance of its construction. Constructing no teaching philosophies among teacher educators raises inquiries about the effectiveness of their teachings and/or the realizations of their institutions' objectives and/or the overall goals of the higher education.

Teaching Philosophy Statements: Unrealized Hopes

Among twenty teacher educator participants, only five teacher educators stated their teaching philosophy statements without any prior explanation by the author of this article. These statements, according to the participants, are however not written. The statements are based on their many years of learning and teaching experiences and sound appropriate as they are bound to the context they teach in. The following text reports some part of the teaching statement of Teacher Educator 12:

I hate lecturing ... class should be in the form of discussion but due to the large number of students in the class I try to group students and they discuss and make presentations.... My philosophy is that the answer is not with the instructor; student and instructor look for the answer. The student should understand that the instructor knows not everything, the instructor is a human being, could have knowledge or not [on that specific issue] ... Teaching is making students think. ... We all have minds, but some people use their minds. Here we await knowledge and information to approach us; students are waiting for teachers to give them the materials to memorize.

Above statement reflects how Teacher Educator 12 believes that teacher is not the main source of knowledge and that teaching is like helping students critically think and investigate matters on their own. It is true that students and teachers are human beings but there should be models students follow during their course of studies. This teaching statement is not attained for reasons explained in the following statement:

I think my teaching philosophy is based on the course [he is instructing] ... here. At the university we do not have labs and there are between one hundred to one hundred

and fifty students in one class. So, we teach scientific courses theoretically ... My teaching philosophy is that we should not lecture students ... [For teaching] I prepare myself well, measure the time for teaching a subject matter, when I finish the class, how many students will participate ... and sometimes I involve students in competition (Teacher Educator 14).

The discourse of Teacher Educator 14 indicates that he has different views about teaching; views that differ from one course to another. Teaching educational courses, according to him, should differ from teaching scientific courses that demand practical engagement. Of course, some courses demand using more skills and techniques than others. Teacher Educator 14 contends that students should not be only receptive. Despite the crowded classes, Teacher Educator 14 occasionally gives activities where students compete to show understanding. Understanding is an initial and ultimate purpose for any study course. It is the skill through which we base our present and future thinking. Thinking logically reflects, in one way or another, a person's understanding. In this respect, Teacher Educator 15, a program chairperson, explains that his teaching philosophy is assisting students in reaching such a stage of logical thinking, saying 'my teaching philosophy is to help a student think logically whether in mathematics or their natural life, how s/he can prove something based on the information and theories we give'. But it is not clear how such logical thinking skills can be achieved through the lecturing style, where the lecturer is dominant in the class. Teacher Educator 16 believes that her role is help answer students' inquiries during the teaching activity but due to students' lack of knowledge, she uses the lecturing approach. She commented:

I have an absolute content that my role is like a constructive consultant and not a lecturer. Sources of information/knowledge are many ... so I try to use a mixture of teaching styles ... discussion but sometimes I find that students lack the basic knowledge which we call 'the base of the pyramid' so I am reluctant to instruct some knowledge for the students.

Having a good body of knowledge in one's specialty area (at least) is a must for every teacher educator. Attaining the basic duties and values of the profession is also obligatory. Aspiring for better teaching results is significantly necessary especially when teaching facilities are provided. In this concern, Teacher Educator 20 stated:

My teaching philosophy is based on having a great body of knowledge. And I have tried to achieve this at least in my specialty area. I also do my best to be punctual and very careful about the values of the profession regarding preparing the lessons or lectures and having sufficient knowledge on the subject matter ... I would care for letting students do presentations and lead discussions in the class, but this is impossible here because we have so many students in one class.

To sum up, above teaching conceptions reflect teachers' aspirations toward using the learner-centered approach wherein teachers' role is simply facilitating the processes of learning. Further, incorporating experiential activities using technology and platforms into the traditional lecturing style is important in today's

world (Gagliardi, 2007); however, this demands the presence of sufficient teaching aids and the presence of around 20-25 students in the class. As such, teachers have no choice but to employ the lecturing style that goes against their will. Setting up clear criteria for admission, providing teaching aids, and evaluating teaching effectiveness will help in realizing such teaching conceptions, which in return and in effect would lead to preparing better qualified students.

Curriculum Design and Evaluation: A Random Process

One of the main problems higher teacher education programs face in Yemen is the absence of well-developed curricula and teaching materials. Although it is one of the aims of the 'national strategy for the development of higher education' to reform and develop the curricula at the higher education sector, curricula still are the same as they were two to three decades ago. The absence of clear policy for developing or reforming the curricula at higher education led educators to follow their own strategies while designing/selecting materials for teaching the courses assigned to them. Although they are teacher educators, many of them lack the skills of developing a teaching material. Lacking teaching materials development skills made educators choose materials that go with their own interests that might not interest students at all. There is no analysis of students' needs while choosing teaching materials for all programs at higher education. Teacher educators reported that they select the teaching materials taught at other Arab countries and use them in their teachings. The following are examples of the participants' statement regarding this issue:

We have items of courses given in the program [and instructors follow these items and prepare their teaching materials] based on their experience. ... A teacher might prepare a course material that goes well with their little experience (Teacher Educator 5).

In fact, there is weakness in the [syllabus] description in all programs. In 2005, we had a departmental workshop wherein we described the syllabus courses, but it is not renewed yet (Teacher Educator 9).

Teaching and materials development depend on the way you [instructor] think to be appropriate. There are no rules or plans or anything that direct you. So, you find most of instructors teach their theses/dissertations (Teacher Educator 13).

We normally take the course content from the same department found in the Arts College... It is then up to the teaching faculty to choosing the suitable book for teaching students (Teacher Educator 19).

Above transcripts indicate that teachers are free to teach whatever they want. There is no committee for evaluating the course materials or the teaching process. Whether the syllabus (prepared many years ago) is providing quality is not measured yet. Developing a course material on the comparison with courses outlines in other different Arab universities is ineffective because students' needs are different regardless of the context, environment, culture and so many other factors. It appears that knowledge concerning designing, evaluating and developing teaching materials is important for many teacher educators and it is urgent.

Discussion

Since cultures, teaching beliefs, and learning styles differ from one context to another, teaching philosophy also changes from one context to another. Further, because teachers and students hold different teaching and learning experiences, teaching philosophy also is relativistic and a teacher needs to change their teaching philosophy depending on the culture they live and work in.

Developing a teaching philosophy is significant because it helps a teacher reflect upon their teaching practices, leading to improve such practices. The findings of this article highlight the critical need for raising awareness toward the importance of constructing teaching philosophy statements in higher teacher education programs in the context of Yemen. Lack of teaching statements might indicate absence of clear teaching objectives and those of the programs as well. Given this, it is possible that such programs lack strategic policies as well as quality assurance committees. Further, higher teacher education programs in Yemen lack strategic planning. There are no clear policies concerning admission into programs (Muthanna, 2011; 2016), curriculum planning and development, or teaching instructions. There must be a professional committee for evaluating current curriculum and improving it.

It is disappointing to find out that many Yemeni teacher educators lack teaching philosophies and the necessary skills for designing teaching materials for their teacher students. Such lack of such two important qualities of a good teacher educator led to a great challenge in realizing the aims of higher education in general. Lacking both teaching philosophies and knowledge for improving or developing sound teaching materials at higher teacher education programs led teacher educators to randomly perform these two activities. If this is the case of higher teacher education programs where teacher educators must have developed sound teaching philosophies and have sufficient knowledge in developing, improving or evaluating a teaching material, it is then an indicator that the outputs of such programs might lack such important qualities and other significant ones. It is further implied that other higher education programs such as those related to, for example, engineering, agriculture, medicine, law, Art, or commerce colleges would have further challenges concerning these two significant concepts (teaching philosophy and curriculum development knowledge) as they did not take any educational-related courses. They even did not take any official training regarding these two concepts. It is therefore of paramount importance that university administrators need to enforce a law regarding the importance of developing teaching philosophies among the teaching staff and offer workshops wherein professional trainers would train teaching faculty on how to develop a sound teaching philosophy and practice it in such educational situations, and on improving, developing or/and evaluating teaching materials. Doing this would help teacher educators and other academics at universities to achieve the purposes of the teaching activity effectively and efficiently.

Conclusion

The article reports on the need for developing teaching philosophy statements. It also highlights the lack of awareness concerning the teaching philosophy statements construction among teacher educators and teacher students, the random process of designing and evaluating teaching materials among teacher educators, and the lack of teaching aids for realizing the teaching philosophies of those with developed teaching statements. As a result, it is positive and imperative for university leaders and administrators to establish a program that focuses on the professional development of the teaching faculty with a focus on highlighting and providing useful knowledge on the 'teaching philosophy statements' construction and 'materials design and evaluation' processes. This not only enhances the teaching beliefs and practices of teacher educators -leading to constructing teaching philosophies-, but also helps in educating their teacher students on the significance of constructing teaching philosophy statements. The continuous reflections on such teaching philosophy statements improve the teaching practices, leading to a satisfactory teaching/learning activity.

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