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Power in (Re)Writing a Teaching Philosophy

ELISABETH SPINNER

I had the opportunity to rewrite my teaching philosophy this past year and the experience was insightful. The practice of not only writing, but rewriting and reflecting upon one's teaching philosophy should be a practice established beginning in methods courses and continued to be practiced by teachers throughout their careers. By reflecting on my teaching philosophy, I realized my teaching identity has changed and evolved throughout the past ten years. James Gee (2014) says "language allows us to be things" (p. 2). To me, this means that using language allows us to create our identity. Being able to articulate one's identity is powerful, and offers opportunity for growth in the teaching practice. After writing out my teaching philosophy, I realized what identity my language was creating. My teaching identity also has a direct impact on my students. Taking the time to articulate my philosophy every year or so and then reflecting on my identity allows me to see how I am making a difference in my students' lives, and how they are making a difference in mine. I also saw how various theories and ideas are actually enacted in my classroom. I got a better idea of which ones work and become part of my practice, and which ones don't and are abandoned for the time being. When I wrote my first teaching philosophy as a pre-service teacher, my identity was just developing. I did not have any concrete experiences upon which to base any kind

of identity, just some teaching practices I thought might work out pretty well for hypothetical students. My identity as an educator has been shaped by experiences, my students, and my own education. These factors continue to influence my shifting identity as I move into the role of a teacher educator. It would benefit all educators to rewrite their teaching philosophies from time to time as a means to reflectively think about their teacher identities. The teaching philosophy is often only revisited when searching for a new job, but really the document is constantly changing and evolving as the educator changes and evolves. The process of writing it out helps educators to assess their personal and professional growth, as well as their contributions towards students.

The practice of writing my teaching philosophy gave me the power to reflect on how I'm still building my identity as a teacher. James Gee (2014) says "these things we do and are (identities) thereby come to exist in the world and, in turn, they bring about other things in the world. We use language to build things in the world, to engage in world building, and to keep the social world going" (p. 31). Writing our teaching philosophies requires us to use language to allow our identities to come into existence. Using discourse, including writing, constructs seven, what Gee (2014) calls, realities (p. 35). Four of these are applicable to using a teaching philosophy for reflection as to build a teaching identity. The first

reality is significance. Gee (2014) presents this as how using language can make something more or less significant (p. 32). In the case of a teaching philosophy, elements that are emphasized can reflect significant aspects of a teacher's identity. My original philosophy brought up the importance of getting to know my students and building relationships, something that is an important part of my teaching identity. However, after reflecting upon how that was being enacted in my classroom, my updated philosophy became much more specific and student centered. In my original philosophy, I wrote "Success varies based on the individual and students will constantly be asked to reflect on and assess their own work." When I applied Gee's idea of using language to make something significant, I realized that my language was getting at this idea of relationships by getting to know individual students and what success would look like for each of them. But I realized that, for me, it was more than that. After reflecting on this, I expanded my philosophy to say "Creating a sense of community and building relationships is the most important part of teaching... I strive to help students see how what they are learning in the writing classroom will help them to achieve their goals. Each one of my students has something important to contribute to the world around them..." By using words like "most important" and "I strive," my rewritten philosophy uses language to

make the work I do towards getting to know my students very significant. When writing and reflecting upon a teaching philosophy, teachers can consider what is significant to them. These techniques, strategies, and ideas that are emphasized probably reflect a teacher's identity. If, after reflection, teachers don't feel like their values are in the philosophy, they can revise until it does reflect what they feel is significant. The next reality Gee (2014) argues is that writing enacts identity (p. 33). By writing my teaching philosophy, my identity as an educator was being enacted. Without being put into language, my identity wasn't being built effectively. I was also giving certain identities to my students by considering what teaching strategies work best for them. In my original teaching philosophy, I wrote that "I will have high expectations for my students. My goal in my classroom is to educate students so they will be informed citizens and have the ability and knowledge to achieve their goals." I would say the identity I am enacting in this excerpt is the gatekeeper of knowledge kind of teacher, given the focus on information and knowledge. When I thought about the identity my language was giving myself and my students, I wanted to revise it to better reflect how I saw myself and my students in my classroom. In my rewritten philosophy, I wrote "Each one of my students has something important to contribute to the world around them and I want to help them use their voice to make that contribution... using their voice adds to the concept of community because students are engaged and interested in the assignments and want to share ideas with each other." This rewritten philosophy reflects my identity as more of a guide, a coach, a mentor in the classroom. Gee says that language also gives others an identity (p. 34). In my rewritten philosophy, I gave

my students an identity of an engaged community member rather than just an informed citizen. This idea of identity in a philosophy is important for all teachers to consider. Who are we as teachers, as people? How is that impacting our students? And, who are our students? What identities are we giving them by implementing certain strategies and theories? When writing a teaching philosophy, teachers can consider how the act of using language to construct their identities allows them a chance to reflect on their practices and the experiences of their students.

A third reality Gee (2014) brings up is relationships. When using language, relationships with others are enacted (p. 34). My philosophy has three readers—myself, my students, and colleagues or administrators. For my students and colleagues, I am building a relationship that shows my commitment to students, to education, to doing what is right to help students become critical thinkers and to help make the world a better place. In the excerpt above from my original philosophy, my language reflects my relationship with my students as the gatekeeper of knowledge. Upon reflection, it looks like I wanted to convey that relationship to future administration that would be reading my philosophy as part of my job application. Perhaps I wanted to convey that I knew my content. Whatever my reason, I don't think I identify as much with that relationship at this point in my career. In my updated philosophy, I wrote that "Watching my students grow and be successful is the greatest indicator of my effectiveness, and the greatest reward of teaching." When colleagues or administrators read this, I believe it will show that I want my relationship with them to center on this definition of student success and how we can work towards it. It also tells students how I

approach my relationship with them. For both audiences, it creates a relationship by being clear on what I value about student success. We as educators should consider writing a teaching philosophy because it allows us the opportunity to reflect upon the relationships we are building, or not building. After writing a philosophy, teachers can ask themselves if relationships they think are important are visible in their philosophies. This kind of questioning requires some vulnerability because the answer might not be perfect and might require some work, but it will also lead to growth. The final reality Gee (2014) brings up related to the teaching philosophy is that language creates connections or relevance between things (p. 35). In my teaching philosophy, I wanted readers to see how I made connections between my own values and identity, and my teaching and my students. Specifically, this connection I made was between my values and how they help my students be well informed, open minded, and productive citizens in their worlds. In my original teaching philosophy, I made a connection between education and success when I wrote that "I believe that education is the crucial piece to achieving success. It is a right of every student to have equal access to a quality education. A quality education is the foundation of every path in life..." I think this connection still makes sense and is reflected in my updated philosophy, but it is expanded upon and more in depth to reflect how I go about this connection. In my updated philosophy, I wrote that "in my lessons, there is a focus on teaching effective communication through a variety of assignments, as authentic as possible. Students practice writing in a number of genres that they could actually publish in, if they chose." Later, I wrote "Blogging about books is something people do in the real world and they

were motivated to write in this way. I was also able to get to know my students' reading preferences through this blog... which contributed to relationship building throughout the classroom." By writing these specific examples as connections to my beliefs, I am reflecting on my practices and assessing if I'm implementing the language of my beliefs. My updated philosophy, in this case, reflects my experiences and concrete ways of implementing my values. This portrays a stronger connection I'm trying to make between my values and what they actually look like in my classroom. Teachers can reflect on what connections are being created in their philosophies. Are these connections important to their identities? Are there connections that are part of their identities that aren't visible in the philosophy? Why is that? These are all important questions for reflection after writing the teaching philosophy.

A benefit of using discourse analysis when reflecting on a teaching philosophy is that it can be done at any point in one's career. This is what will hopefully encourage teachers at all stages of their careers to revisit and reflect on their teaching philosophies. Instead of rewriting it when it comes time to find a new job (and then, is it just being written to impress someone?), rewriting and reflecting on it starting in methods courses, using discourse analysis, is important. This form of analysis offers teachers, from preservice to veterans, to think about how their identity is forming, what informs it, what influences it. At first, it is probably methods courses and field experiences that inform and influence a teaching philosophy. Throughout the years, however, experiences like professional development, college courses, work with specific students, colleagues, and many other aspects will inform and influence a teacher's philosophy. Reflection upon

these experiences can help teachers, again at all points in their career, to think about how what they believe and value is being articulated in their teaching. This makes for more successful teaching and a stronger emphasis on a teacher's values. When I reflected upon and rewrote my teaching philosophy, I realized it was informed and influenced by my specific experiences with students. It was very important for me to convey this in my philosophy. It also showed me ways that I can improve my teaching because I reflected on specific experiences with students over the years and what helped them to be successful, and what didn't. This honest reflection and rewriting can also empower teachers because they can see the value in their own experiences and beliefs. This, too, will lead to more successful and effective teaching, which is what our students deserve and need.

Writing out our philosophies gives us an opportunity to question if we are sticking to our values and sense of self, or are we bending to the demands of the profession at the expense of what we know in our hearts. Heidi Hallman (2017) suggests that teachers must develop internally as they adapt to external demands in order to have a sustainable commitment to their ethical self (p. 99). This sustaining narrative can help teachers stick to their values when being presented with external demands (96). When working with beginning teachers, she found that many new teachers became "shape-shifters," or began to change and adapt to the demands of the job, district, and administration (8, 18). She had many conversations with teachers about whether they were really able to create a sustaining narrative with all the shape-shifting (96). I feel that it isn't just new teachers that have to adapt to changes, but all teachers experience these changes and increased demands of their teaching. If teachers

are constantly expected to change and adapt to new curriculum, new standards, new principles, new policies, how are they able to create sustaining narratives? How can they stick to their values while meeting the demands and expectations of testing, curriculum, and policies? I believe the answer could be by using their teaching philosophy. By writing, reflecting upon, and rewriting their teaching philosophy, they are thinking about their identity, which gives them something constant and helps them focus on their goals. This rewriting of the teaching philosophy may help teachers at all stages to have a sustaining narrative. After reflecting on and rewriting their philosophy, they can compare it to what they are doing in their classrooms and identify ways in which they can still stick to the values in their philosophy and meet the demands and expectations of the school. I believe, too, that teachers will find it refreshing and empowering to revisit their values and what they feel is important in teaching. They will be encouraged to reflect on the ways they are making a difference in their students' lives.

In order to create their sustaining narrative, teachers must take time to reflect on their values and what they believe is important about teaching. Teachers go into the profession with some values and sense of right and wrong when it comes to teaching. It is important to stick to these values and use the knowledge of right and wrong to inform teaching practices. For example, I believed it was right to help students learn to think critically and form their own educated opinions on matters. These values can become difficult to stick to when teachers are faced with the ongoing challenges of standardized tests, data, and mandated curriculum. With the ongoing pressure of standardized test scores and the teacher evaluations based

on data, I had to decide if I was going to spend more time teaching students how to write the SAT essay, or if I could spend a few more lessons on using 1984 to address issues in today's society that students needed to be thinking about. Upon reflection using discourse analysis, these decisions were based on my sticking to my sustaining narrative. I had to shift shapes and adapt to new curriculum and a new grade level, but my goals and values of teaching my students something that mattered to them and to their worlds was still my main focus and that is what drove my decision making. With this in mind, I decided to teach a few more lessons about applying a novel to their lives and had to get creative as to how to incorporate SAT test preparation into those lessons. I tried to find a compromise between my values and the demands of testing, but not compromise at the expense of what was best for my students. These are the dilemmas facing teachers as they try to stick to their values. Having a strong sense of self, or identity, can help with this, and rewriting a teaching philosophy each year allows teachers to reflect on the level to which they are sticking to their values and teaching what they believe is right.

Rewriting our philosophy and reflecting on our identity also gives us the chance to think about how we are making a difference in our students' lives, which is by far the most important thing we do as teachers. Do our identities reflect a passion for students? After writing a line of our philosophy, can we trace that back to a specific student who taught us more than they ever knew? Our students' experiences are reflected in our own identities. Upon reflection, we are likely to see how our students have shaped us. As a high school English teacher, one of my most rewarding moments included seeing reluctant readers enjoy a book. Years later, I still remember specific

students and the books they came to love. I also remember the students who struggled, who overcame, who grew as individuals in my classroom. These are the students who taught me something, that made a difference in my life. As I rewrote my philosophy, I noticed I was picturing these specific faces, thinking about what helped them to learn in my classroom. In addition to these students, I had also informed my teaching practice with theories that I had read about and gained concrete experiences in. This combination of specific students and concrete experiences with theories lead to my evolving teaching philosophy. Those important and impactful strategies and moments have become part of my philosophy. My philosophy includes allowing student choice in reading, and a lot of it, because I now know that is how to get students to love reading. My philosophy came to reflect this through reading about theories on independent reading and through specific students who came to love books because they were given the opportunity to pick what they read.

After writing my teaching philosophy, I was able to see these common themes that emerged and I was able to reflect on if those were making the kind of impact in students' lives that I wanted. Not everything that came up in my philosophy was what I wanted to appear significant to me. I believe that students should use literature as a way to explore the world, to learn about other people and places, to develop informed opinions. Helping students to love reading and use it to learn more about the world is part of my identity. I was glad this became apparent in my philosophy. But the theme of appropriate technology use kept coming up in my philosophy. I reflected on specific lessons and specific students and technology was often involved. Was it too much technology?

Was that making the kind of difference in my students' lives that I was hoping for? It gave me an opportunity to think about changes I could make to better implement my teaching identity in my classroom. This opportunity also made me feel a little vulnerable because I had to admit that I wasn't done growing yet, that I was still figuring things out this far into my career. By rewriting our philosophies, we can see if values that are truly important to us are being reflected in our teaching.

Our philosophies are also likely to reflect how our own education, both formal and informal, has influenced our teacher identity. Classes we take, experiences we have, and conversations we are a part of all teach us something. Reflecting on this education allows us to see how what we learned has impacted who we are. By rewriting my philosophy this past year, I came to the realization of the impact of technology on my teaching. If asked about it, I would say that technology isn't a big part of my teaching, that I don't see myself as a teacher relying on it too much. However, after reflecting on my all I've learned about education over the years, I realized that technology has become a big part of my teaching. I've had many experiences using technology and, as I wrote my philosophy, walked through those experiences and realized how much of an impact they've had on my teaching. For example, I've had the opportunity to teach online classes, without ever having met students face to face. After writing about this experience in my philosophy, I noticed a disconnect with this type of teaching and how it doesn't align well with my philosophy on making strong connections with students. Building relationships with students is part of my identity. Being able to reflect on this has allowed me to reconsider approaches to online teaching. If we as teachers rewrite

our philosophies more often, we will see how our education and experiences are shaping our identities, in both positive and negative ways, and be able to make changes as necessary to become even more impactful educators.

Because of the power that comes with articulating a teaching philosophy, English education methods courses might do more than having students write their philosophies as just a document to go in a job application. Writing the teaching philosophy is a very common assignment in methods classes. Janet Alsup (2006) conducted a study that involved preservice teachers writing this important genre and argues that “philosophy statements alone, disconnected to narratives and/or metaphors, did little to enhance their professional identity development because they usually merely reproduced uninterrogated beliefs or imitated educational discourses” (p. 169). When preservice teachers write their teaching philosophy and don’t effectively reflect on it or connect it to meaningful experiences, the document becomes empty and useless. In contrast, Alsup (2006) argues that grounded philosophy statements can result in reflective thinking and identity growth (p. 169). This is great news for methods courses. There is potential to help preservice teachers grow into reflective teachers and use their philosophies regularly throughout their careers to help their identity grow. If preservice teachers are taught how to analyze and develop their philosophies using discourse analysis, they will be able to reflect on the identity that is being reflected in their philosophies. They can be posed questions, similar to those Gee (2014) poses, to help guide them in analyzing their identity that is being developed. This process can be continued throughout their careers as they grow as teachers and as individuals.

One way of doing this is to connect the philosophy with field experience. A recent study on methods courses revealed a disconnect between methods courses and field experience. One reason for this disconnect is the variety of contexts and experiences that preservice teachers have during their field experience (Pasternak, Caughlan, Hallman, Renzi, & Rush, 2018). That same study found that preservice teachers read about theories and gain new knowledge, but do not actively apply the information in their lessons (Pasterna et al., 2018). Preservice teachers are learning all the important strategies and theories and are likely including these in their teaching philosophies. However, as Alsup (2006) noted, a teaching philosophy that is full of theories and no personal narrative is not helpful for the teacher candidate (p. 169). There are two issues here, one being the disconnect between field experience and student teaching and the second issue being preservice teachers writing useless teaching philosophies. A potential solution might be to use the teaching philosophy to help students connect their methods classes and the theories they are learning in them to their field experiences. Methods instructors can guide preservice teachers to identifying exact moments in their lessons and teaching when specific theories were enacted or attempted. They can then turn to their teaching philosophies and identify how they are articulating these practices, thus creating a connection between methods and field experience using the teaching philosophy. This connection will have to be taught explicitly at first, but then preservice teachers will begin to naturally apply theories to their actual teaching and, after reflecting on what it looks like for them, build those into their philosophies with concrete examples. Students should also be encouraged to include

personal aspects of this experience in their philosophies, such as specific theories, lessons and strategies they are using to help their students become successful. This process could occur many times throughout the teacher preparation courses. By rewriting their teaching philosophies throughout their education preparation classes, they will be forced to look again at the theories that are informing their practices. This is something that probably should occur throughout a teacher’s entire career, too. They shouldn’t write their philosophy and be done with it, but continue to develop it as they learn more, teach more students, and have more experiences. All of this contributes to a teacher’s developing identity. As they enter the field, beginning teachers will see what these theories actually look like in the classroom and they will see which theories inform their own teaching practices and which ones don’t. This constant reflection on the teaching philosophy will encourage preservice and beginning teachers to think about how to connect their methods classes to actual teaching. It will also help them to develop a sound teaching philosophy based on theory and actual teaching.

Another benefit of this strategy in methods courses is that teachers will be encouraged from the beginning of their careers to revisit their teaching philosophies more often than when just in search of a job. This will benefit teachers when they are creating their sustaining narratives that Heidi Hallman (2017) discusses (p. 102). By using their teaching philosophy to create their sustaining narrative from the very beginning of their career and being encouraged to revisit it constantly, teachers might be better able to adapt to changes and still feel like they are able to stick to their values. Method courses

could be very intentional about helping preservice teachers develop a sustaining narrative. If preservice teachers are asked to write, reflect on, and rewrite their teaching philosophies, it will become a more meaningful document and teachers will see the value in spending the time on continuing to use it as a reflective opportunity throughout their careers. As Alsup (2006) notes, a disconnected teaching philosophy is uninterrogated beliefs (p. 169). As teacher educators, we do not want our preservice teachers to have uninterrogated beliefs, but rather beliefs based on theory, knowledge, experience, and critical analysis of how these all work together. Similarly, a classroom teacher will want his or her students to avoid uninterrogated beliefs. Throughout a teacher's career, many things in society will change. Teachers have a unique position in society and it is essential they are clear on their own identity and interrogate how their beliefs are being formed. Alsup (2006) says teachers "should realize that their identity is also in flux—always developing, always with the potential for growth and development" (p. 193). The teacher identity is maybe never done developing, and it is essential that teachers realize this. It is also essential that they keep reflecting on their developing identity and what is influencing it. There will likely be local, state, nation, and world events going on that will impact how a teacher feels personally and that will inevitably impact their teaching. Reflecting on this is helpful for a teacher to maintain a sustaining identity. This reflection process will also help them teach their own students how to develop informed opinions and beliefs, something very much needed in today's world. Students need to know how to think about what is going on in the world around them, become informed, and reflect on it to develop their own

growing and developing identities as informed citizens.

One of the biggest takeaways I had after rewriting my teaching philosophy was the difference between writing the philosophy as an undergraduate student and then again as an experienced teacher. As an undergraduate student, writing a teaching philosophy is articulating ideas. When writing as a practicing teacher, actions are being articulated. There is power in this practice because teachers can analyze their language and word choice to reflect on their practices and identities. My philosophy reflects the values of my identity, which is extremely important to know as a teacher. I found I was arranging my experiences, skills, and attributes as I reflected on my philosophy, and this helped bring my values in my practice to the surface for analysis. Hallman (2017) says this arranging is important for teachers in sustaining a narrative (p. 102). After reflecting on my own experience, I think it is also important to connect this sustaining narrative to how my teaching reflects my identity and values. Teachers may not be fully aware of how their values and identity are impacting their teaching without writing their philosophy and analyzing the discourse they use. I also realized my identity is still changing and developing. With each lesson taught, student encountered, year passed, I learn more and it all contributes to my still evolving identity. This admittance to still growing requires a certain vulnerability that nearly all teachers develop in their classrooms. My developing identity also reflects a quest for balance. I seek balance in sticking to the values in my identity and meeting the demands of my school. This vulnerability and pursuit for balance is a result of my teaching experience and growth as a person. Writing my teaching philosophy gave me the opportunity to

reflect on my growth and pursuit of this balance.

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