

Sample Statement of Teaching Philosophy

Used with permission from the author.

Dr. Penelope A. Hansen
Faculty of Medicine

Teaching Philosophy and Achievements: An Evolution in Fits and Starts

When I look back over my development as a teacher, I see that it resembles the pattern of biological evolution: its progress has been marked by a series of crucial events that have markedly changed my ideas about my role and behavior as a teacher. I can identify experiences that influenced me reaching as far back as primary school. In my small rural school, my teachers allowed me to help younger students with their schoolwork after I had completed my own. I can still recall how good – how special – that made me feel: I experienced a distinctive kind of pleasure from interacting with other children in this way. Later, in high school and at university, I was taught by a few teachers who engaged me in an extraordinary way because of their intelligence, their enthusiasm for their subjects, and their humane ways of interacting with students. In fact, because of the influence of my first-year chemistry professor, I switched my major from the arts to sciences and earned a B.Sc. in chemistry. *These experiences gave me a sense that teaching was a pleasurable human interaction that could have potent effects on learners.*

I started on the path of becoming a teacher during my doctoral training. I was extremely fortunate to have a supervisor who was also my mentor. Dr. Kenneth B. Roberts not only taught me how to do research and write about it and how to navigate the politics of academic life – but also how to interact with students in ways that helped them to learn. He allowed me to do more and more of “his” teaching, each time with discussion of my plans for the session and debriefing afterwards. *I soon realized that I needed to put the same kind of careful, logical thought into teaching as I did into research.* Although it immediately became my practice, it wasn’t until much later that I articulated this idea in an editorial titled “Multiplying the benefits of research training” (*Am. J. Physiol.* 266:S1, 1994).

My mentor was an outstanding public speaker who gave engaging – even exciting – lectures. I, on the other hand, was at first frightened to death of lecturing. To increase my level of comfort, I wrote out all my lectures and virtually read from the scripts, which included far too much detail – all trees and no forest. I perceived lecturing as some kind of “test” of myself – of my knowledge of the lecture topic. *Eventually I realized two essential things about lecturing: first, it isn’t about me – it’s all about students; and second, teaching is not the same thing as “telling”.*

Realization that the only role of teaching is to help students learn came as a blinding flash of the obvious, after which I quickly lost a great deal of my fear of lecturing and began to focus more on what students need to learn and how I could help them do it. As I began to wonder about the purposes of lecturing, my mentor, with his usual sense of impeccable timing, gave me copy of Donald Bligh’s “What’s the Use of Lectures?” I found this as exciting to read as the latest paper related to my area of research. We had some very stimulating discussions about the ideas in this book, the kind of discussions about teaching that are sadly missing from many graduate students’ experience.

Understanding that teaching is not just “telling” came as a revelation to me when I gave what I thought was an excellent lecture on Starling forces. It was followed the next day by a small group problem-based discussion that involved this topic. I facilitated one of the groups which happened to include some of the brightest, most motivated medical students – and it became clear as I listened that they didn’t understand Starling forces! This was a crucial point in my evolution as a teacher, after which I started to think even harder about how I could create lectures that were more effective at helping students understand the concepts of physiology, rather than leading them to simply memorize facts. *I realized that I needed to incorporate active learning activities in my lectures.* I slowly began to adopt this approach to give students opportunities to apply what they were hearing and to give me ongoing feedback about whether or not they understood what I was saying. Some of my physiology colleagues, particularly Dee Silverthorn, have helped me to learn about and use active learning techniques in practical and creative ways. I am still developing this aspect of my teaching, currently exploring the use of “clickers”.

Nearly twenty years ago I began to receive teaching awards from our medical students. Looking back, I see that this was a terrific “feel-good” experience that encouraged me to focus more and more on teaching and less and less on bench research. In 1988 I made the difficult decision to close my lab, and took up a full-time administrative position as Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Medical Education. Our dean supported my development by funding my participation in education meetings and short courses. These helped me to advance my knowledge of the theories and practice of education and to learn qualitative research methods that I could use to evaluate educational innovations. I found out that my ideas about teaching had solid foundations in constructivist and social theories of learning, and that there was a huge body of research on pedagogy that I needed to explore. *The realization that what I had learned empirically about teaching and learning had solid theoretical and research bases stimulated me to dig into this body of literature and to begin writing about education.*

I became an advocate of the idea that writing about something increases your understanding of it, which I expressed in an editorial, “Writing to learn physiology” (*Am. J. Physiol.* 267:S1, 1995). Furthermore, the discipline required to write publishable papers about education made me a better writer and a more thoughtful teacher. In 1992 the APS Publications Committee and Council took a chance on me – a Canadian previously unknown to them. They appointed me Chief Editor of *Advances in Physiology Education* – another crucial fork in my evolutionary path as an educator. It gave me opportunities to meet and work with many new colleagues in the APS and around the world whose primary academic focus was on physiology education. I no longer felt like an odd-woman-out, as I had felt among my basic science colleagues at Memorial during the four years since closing my research lab. *I realized that being part of a virtual community of like-minded physiologists gave me both the confidence and the opportunities I needed to continue developing as an educator.* These opportunities were broadened with my involvement with the APS Teaching Section and the IUPS Education Committee, both of which I have been fortunate to chair.

Two more events caused abrupt changes in my evolution as a teacher – like pebbles that start avalanches. One was a stage performance I attended in Switzerland and the other was a two-word phrase I ran across in a book on higher education that I was reading.

A colleague took me to a performance that was essentially a monologue, with minimal props and no set, of a section of Mann's "The Magic Mountain". I had previously read this novel in English so I could partly follow the story even though the performance was in German, a language I hardly understood. I began to pay attention to the actor's body language and the way he used his voice. The audience was paying rapt attention – you could have heard a pin drop. *And then the penny dropped for me: I realized that students might be more engaged during a lecture if I used more body language and modulated my voice, and if I organized lecture material as a "story" rather than hierarchically, as I had been doing.* I started reworking lectures to frame them within everyday scenarios or clinical cases, which act as storylines. I'm still working on creating a more engaging stage presence, since my default speaking voice is rather monotone and my natural movements are minimal.

The phrase that sparked a radical change in my teaching was "hidden curriculum". The idea that there might be something hidden in teaching and learning had never occurred to me until 1990 when I came across these two words together. I began to have intense discussions about this idea with my mentor. And, it so happened that I had just been awarded a Canadian teaching fellowship that included a five-day retreat at a resort in rural Quebec. At the retreat nine other awardees from other disciplines and universities and I had a continuous, lively, free-flowing discussion about teaching and learning. I had only recently discovered those two magic words and couldn't stop thinking about them – and the hidden curriculum turned out to be one of our best discussions at the retreat. Hearing other disciplines' ideas about this topic helped me to analyze the hidden curriculum for physiology. *Realizing first that a hidden curriculum exists and then understanding its effects on learning was probably the single most important evolutionary change I've experienced as a teacher.* It has enabled me to change how I teach in ways that take advantage of the hidden beneficial aspects and lessen the undesirable ones. I was invited to write a piece about physiology's hidden curriculum for the APS journal then called *NIPS (News Physiol. Sci. 7:41-44, 1992)*, and these ideas later formed the basis for my Bernard Distinguished Lecture in 2002 titled "Physiology's Recondite Curriculum" (*Adv. Physiol. Educ. 26:139-145, 2002*). I am still engaged by the idea of a hidden curriculum, and last August I presented research findings about the significant influence of the hidden curriculum on medical students' career choices at a European education conference. It was as if those two words lit a fuse, a fuse that is still burning after eighteen years.

These fits and starts in my evolution as a teacher have come from my interaction with my mentor and other colleagues, from paying attention to my students' learning, from reading and writing about physiology education – and even from attending a play in a language I didn't understand. Each of these nine events was followed by a period in which I thought about the event and sometimes immediately, sometimes very slowly, realized something new and significant that changed my beliefs and behavior as a teacher. Through these experiences I have come to see my interaction with students as one of deep complexity, involving the full range of emotion and intelligence that informs all human interaction. Sometimes I relate to my students as a friend or coach who encourages and advises, sometimes as an expert who can help them see the "big picture" or explain complicated information, sometimes as just another part of a team that has to work hard together to master a body of knowledge. I am still discovering how to do these things better, still excited and enjoying every minute of it ... and still evolving.