

## On the Enduring and Fleeting Uses of the Teaching Statement

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### Article abstract

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# On the Enduring and Fleeting Uses of the Teaching Statement

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## ABSTRACT

*A teaching statement offers a written summary of one's beliefs, approaches, and successes in teaching. In this article, I use the teaching statement that I wrote in library school as an autoethnographic artifact to consider my own development as a teacher, and to reflect on the teaching statement as a genre. How do we declare ourselves as teachers, and how does that identity develop and shift over time? I conclude with considerations of how a teaching statement can serve academic librarians.*

**Keywords:** *teaching statements · teacher development*

## RÉSUMÉ

*Une déclaration de philosophie d'enseignement (DPE) est un résumé écrit des convictions, des approches et des réussites d'une personne en matière d'enseignement. Dans cet article, j'utilise la déclaration de philosophie d'enseignement que j'ai rédigée à l'école de bibliothéconomie comme artefact autoethnographique pour analyser mon propre développement en tant qu'enseignant et pour réfléchir à la déclaration d'enseignement en tant que genre. Comment nous déclarons-nous à travers nos DPE et comment cette identité se développe-t-elle et évolue-t-elle au fil du temps ? Je conclus par des considérations sur comment une déclaration de philosophie d'enseignement peut servir les bibliothécaires universitaires.*

**Mots-clés :** *déclarations de philosophie d'enseignement · développement professionnel des enseignant.e.s*

**W**HEN I first saw the call for proposals for this special issue, I did a little free-writing, as I often do to test what I might have to say about a topic. I landed here: “But I really want to talk about teaching as joy and liberation.” In this paper, I examine the development of my identity as a teacher, framed by the genre of the teaching state-

ment. I reflect on my own early teaching statement as a declaration of my intentions, and how those intentions have evolved in my career as a teaching librarian. I hope that this one narrative offers insight into the development of teaching librarians and to the potential use of the teaching statement for librarians.

## **Where We Start And Where We Land**

In considering the role of teaching in my own work as an academic librarian, I first thought back to when I started to formally learn how to teach, during a summer term when I took the elective course on library instruction at the University of British Columbia (UBC). At the time, the course was taught by Colleen Bell, a working academic librarian and adjunct faculty member.

This class wasn't the first time I had taught. We all teach and learn throughout our lives, at least in informal settings. At the time, my most recent teaching experience included coordinating puberty education programs at a Planned Parenthood. I had also worked for a few months as an elementary school aide supporting students who read beneath their grade level, as part of the US federally-funded program Title I which provides additional funding to schools in low-income communities. I had also helped organize DIY (Do-It-Yourself) Academy, a volunteer-run series of workshops in Seattle, hosted by the grassroots Zine Archive and Publishing Project. I didn't lead any workshops for DIY Academy, but I did help get things scheduled, I dumpster dived for bread and Field Roast veggie sausages for our celebrations, and I scared up supplies. In none of these cases did I think of myself as a teacher, exactly. I was a helpmate to learning, rather than the Teacher leading the way.

I clearly remember two activities from the library instruction class I took in my MLIS program. The first was that each of us did a short (five or ten minute) lesson in something, anything at all, to practice basic skills like explaining a concept, breaking a process down into steps, and talking with a group without panicking. My lesson demonstrated how to fold a cootie catcher, a sort of origami fortune teller made from a single sheet of paper, a common game for children. I must have made dozens of them in practice leading up to the actual class session; they littered my apartment. In class, after each student presented their lesson, the instructor pulled them out in the hall for some immediate reflection. When my turn came, I had all kinds of negative things to say to myself: I talked too fast, I could have given a more clear explanation, I forgot to look at my classmates enough. While it had been a whirlwind, I could remember only the mistakes I'd made. Bell looked shocked—she had expected me to see the good things I did, not only the bad. It was a gift—this lesson that my weaknesses in teaching may be easy for me to see—but I also learned that it is just as important to identify what worked and to be able to recognize successes in my review.

The other assignment that has stayed with me is a statement of teaching, which we wrote as the final activity in class. I'm sure it was aspirational—at the time, I still felt like I wasn't a teacher, although I would go on to teach many, many library welcome sessions for first-year undergraduates the following year as a student librarian in Woodward Library. When I recently looked up that statement, written nearly 15 years ago, I found this: "However, entering even a 10 minute lecture with the philosophy of 'DIY or die' reminds me to teach for liberation and joy." Yes! I wrote that statement before I read bell hooks (1994) on the potential pleasures and liberation in the classroom, or Lynda Barry (2014) on the necessity of play and exploration in mastery, before I even had the concept of the banking model from Paulo Freire to describe the kind of teaching I knew I didn't want to do (Freire et al. 2020). And yet, some seed was there, even before I learned about critical pedagogies and liberatory approaches to teaching. What else has stayed constant for me as a teacher, and what has shifted?

This article is the outcome of a series of reflections spiraling out from that teaching statement (in its multiple versions) that I wrote 14 years ago. Over the course of several months, I have been in conversation with myself, and this piece is the ultimate result.

## A Note on Method

While autoethnographers often seek to avoid explicit description of their methodology (Anderson and Glass-Coffin 2016, 65), it seems useful to say a few words here, particularly to highlight some similarities between autoethnography and the genre of the teaching statement. Autoethnography is "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 739). In this piece, I share my own story towards understanding the role of teaching for academic librarians, and to explore the potential for teaching statements as a generative practice for us. Although autoethnography originates in the social sciences, it is increasingly used in LIS, as evidenced by two recent edited volumes dedicated to the methodology (Deitering, Stoddart, and Schroeder 2017; Fourie 2021). Like other researchers, librarians are drawn to the methodology's potential for creative, reflexive, personal, and justice-minded research (Deitering 2017, 7-8). To offer just a few recent examples, librarians have used autoethnographies to imagine truly BIPOC-centered library staffing (Shearer and Chiewphasa 2021), explore the information needs of people with albinism (Ngula 2023), and reflect on racialized embodiment in library spaces (Santamaria 2020).

Autoethnographic practices of reflection and storytelling also align with the practices of writing a teaching statement (see for example the prompts offered in Kearns and Sullivan 2011, 3). In both the autoethnography and the teaching statement, story-telling offers a way to connect a narrow moment or experience to some broader meaning, whether to one's entire teaching practice or to a cultural group. In both cases, theory deepens the analysis and connects it back to a larger body of work. My process for this piece involved reviewing artifacts including versions of the teaching statement I wrote as a student—and documents where I drew from it, such as job applications and my tenure dossier—then writing and rewriting reflections, and connecting back to the literature I use as a teaching librarian.

Criticisms of autoethnography often hinge on its “either being too artful and not scientific, or too scientific and not sufficiently artful” (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011, under “Critiques and Responses”). While I have attempted to balance between these poles, I am humbled by my own limitations as a writer and a researcher. I also want to echo Anne-Marie Deitering's assertion that “autoethnographies are never really finished” (2017, 16)—both because they capture a moment in space and time, and because revisions could continue almost endlessly. Similarly, teaching statements are intended to be revisited; they're “living documents that grow, change, and evolve alongside your teaching practices and experiences” (Queens University Centre for Teaching and Learning, “Positionality Statement” n.d.).

Finally, Griffin and Griffin have suggested that critiques of autoethnography as overly navel-gazing or self-absorbed actually reflect its role as a “quintessentially millennial methodology, preoccupied as it tends to be with the self, identity, and underpinned by existential uncertainty, perhaps even a sense of ontological precarity” (2019, under “Conclusions: A Millennial Methodology?”). Given that my inquiry started with the teaching statement I wrote as a graduate student shakily starting a career in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, this certainly resonates with me as an elderly millennial. Like many librarians then and now, my professional identity began with several years of precarious work before I found more stable employment. Uncertainty also offers a useful way to think about the genre of the teaching statement, particularly as used by librarians. Academic librarians often teach, but unlike other teaching faculty we are rarely the instructor of record. Our job categories may recognize us as faculty or not, other instructional faculty at our institutions may or may not see us as fellow teachers, and we may have explicit teaching duties or simply find ourselves doing it at the reference desk without even thinking about it. This ambivalence came through in the call for submissions for this special issue, and it makes sense that we want to examine this shifting, unclear, and inconsistent aspect of our professional identity.

## Teaching Statements

A teaching statement is a written encapsulation of your approach to teaching, offering an introduction to the pedagogy you use and ideally describing how you actually teach. Much of the literature around teaching statements is practical, focused on how to write one, or the importance of having one, or how to support graduate students in developing their own (Pike, Bradley, and Mansfield 1997; Schönwetter et al. 2002; Kearns and Sullivan 2011). Though there is little written specifically for teaching librarians, Lally (2000), Zauha (2008), and—on library philosophy statements more holistically—Fuhr (2023) similarly offer support in developing such statements. I also poked around the websites of universities to find advice for writing teaching statements, often landing at a centre for teaching and learning or a graduate student support office. For example, the University of Western Ontario Centre for Teaching and Learning notes that, “A teaching philosophy statement is a written description of your values, goals, and beliefs regarding both teaching and learning... and uses evidence from your teaching to make the case that you have excelled as a teacher...” (n.d.). For librarians, it is worth noting that the genre focuses on the *process*, more than the *content*, of teaching, as its intended audience is likely within your same field. The assumption is that you teach what you teach, and the statement describes *how* you teach it. Given that the genre focuses on process rather than content, this piece will largely sidestep discussions in librarianship about what—if any—our disciplinary content areas are or should be as teachers.

In their thoughtful piece on feminist uses of teaching statements, Brown, Collard, and Hoogeveen (2014) describe how the teaching statement originated in business departments, as a part of broader regimes of assessment. As they note, “While teaching statements open a crucial reflexive space for engaging a personal pedagogical approach, they also serve a utilitarian institutional purpose that is undeniably evaluative” (151). The teaching statement gained broader popularity in the 1990s in line with greater emphasis on undergraduate learning and the professionalization of teaching (Knight and Nesbit 2022; 268). Reading about this history, I couldn’t help but think about how the same period saw the rapid rise in contingent teaching faculty (Magness 2016), as well as huge hikes in the costs of attending university alongside declining public funding for higher education across the United States (Appel 2023), where I grew up and now work. While not directly related to the rise in teaching statements, these conditions shape the educational environment in which we find ourselves writing those statements.

As noted above, the teaching statement as a genre invites you to show that you’ve excelled as a teacher. For many disciplinary faculty in higher education, the teaching statement is frequently written to accompany job applications. While librarian job

advertisements, even for instruction librarians, rarely ask for this kind of document, I can see elements of my teaching statement in cover letters and interview materials I've created over the years, as well as in the personal statement I wrote as part of my tenure dossier.

There's an irony that this personal reflection—about values and practices—should be directed at this particular audience, as it raises questions about the room for honesty and completeness. What are we hiding, from ourselves or from our (future) bosses, colleagues, or students? As Brown, Collard, and Hoogeveen (2014) point out, reflecting on your teaching as part of seeking employment presents a potentially tough decision for radical teachers applying for jobs at conservative institutions: if I'm honest, will I get this job? The anticipated audience always shapes the text. I see the differences between the various versions of my teaching statement, and how my key phrase—"teach for liberation and joy"—doesn't occur in the final version that I submitted for class, but does in the version I keep in my Google Drive, which is the file I actually encounter when I'm looking for things related to my teaching. Similarly, I doubt I would have included specific citations if they hadn't been required by the guidelines for the assignment.

So, a statement of teaching is a way to be accountable for how we teach, or for the effectiveness of our teaching. But accountable to whom? I'm reminded of a different teacher I had at UBC, archival studies professor Terry Eastwood, who always emphasized that archives exist for accountability, for rendering an account, and for that we need to be clear on whose account must be rendered to whom. Writing a teaching statement for a class assignment or for a job application suggests that this accountability flows upward, toward a figure of authority, whether an instructor or a potential supervisor. But what about a teaching statement as an element of accountability toward learners or students? Can it be a statement that this is how I have been, and how I seek to be, as we are together in this opportunity for learning? While some of the university guidance I read encourages incorporating your statement of teaching into your syllabus, I also think of the seemingly evergreen struggle to get students to read the syllabus in the first place. In addition, the nature of most library teaching hardly suits this practice. For a 50 minute guest lecture or one-shot, it is laughable to expect students to read my full-page teaching statement ahead of time. Perhaps the audience then becomes the disciplinary faculty member, to contextualize what I expect from them as the instructor of record, and from their class, and what they all can expect from me. I have never shared my teaching statement in this way, although I have certainly discussed my pedagogy with some disciplinary faculty as we plan a session. Instead, the teaching statement remains a token carried with me to remind myself of my broader philosophy and goals as I also



seek to meet the concrete limitations and expectations of the teaching I do, and as a store to draw from when I need to prepare other formal documents explaining (or defending) my teaching. In this way, the teaching statement can offer accountability to myself.

Given the evaluative nature of the teaching statement, it seems crucial to point out that evaluations of excellence in teaching are fraught, whether due to well-documented racism and sexism in student evaluations (Heffernan 2022) or to general difficulties in determining what learning has happened and what teaching led to it. For librarians, the punctuated and abbreviated nature of much of our teaching adds still more difficulty to assessing learning (see for example Almeida 2022). In the library where I work, we have well-established practices to collect student feedback and other assessments for use in the tenure process—again, a process where we seek to demonstrate excellence. But our shared reflective practices for personal growth as teachers are more haphazard, waxing and waning with interest and felt need. I have always thought that this shows the tacit recognition that formal evaluations just don't make a good place for the vulnerability of deep reflection: the audience, again, expects excellence. You might not want to be too honest about your growth areas in a document that determines your annual raise, or which will be permanently stored in your personnel file. As Servage (2009) notes in writing about the rise of the Scholarship of Teaching, emphasis on accountability can bolster neoliberalism in education, reinforcing a transactional or entrepreneurial approach to teaching and learning.

### **My Own Teaching Statement: Then and Now**

In examining my own teaching statement, I'm following the recommendations of Megan Knight and Kate Nesbit, to reframe it as a learning-to-teach statement, and one that shows “evolutionary stages” rather than “performance of mastery” (2022, 274). I also seek to enact the feedback I received from Colleen Bell so many years ago, that it is important to consider one's strengths as well as the weaknesses that are so easy to spot.

When I reread my statement 14 years later, I see such exuberance, if not confidence, in my own abilities as a learner, forming the basis of my abilities as a teacher. I focused around the phrase “DIY or die,” a sentiment from zinesters and punks that highlights self-determination as a way to liberate oneself from social, economic, and intellectual restrictions. I quoted Raleigh Briggs, that “DIY is not a show of prowess, or even a hobby; rather, it is a necessary step towards living our lives on our own terms” (2009, 3). Much of the advice around writing teaching statements encourages a frame with a critical incident or a central metaphor—DIY



was mine. In this overall frame I see elements of critical pedagogies that at the time I didn't have a name for:

- “No learner is privileged, and the teacher is just a learner who has been here before.”
- “DIY means thinking creatively, solving problems however best you can, and being open to alternative approaches.”
- “By encouraging self-learning, and questioning the way things have always been done, the [DIY librarian] can negotiate new avenues for information sharing.”
- “However, entering even a ten-minute lecture with the philosophy of “DIY or die” reminds me that I learned this material once myself, and that I am teaching to help liberate and empower us all, even if only in the smallest of ways.”

In these snippets, I see my desire to make hierarchy visible and to reduce it where I can; a recognition that teaching and learning are not one-directional. I also see a yearning to always connect learning to real problems in the world. How did I come to this orientation around teaching? As I noted earlier, before going to library school I had been teaching—or supporting learning—in informal, non-institutional, sometimes radical spaces. My orientation to learning was also shaped by other experiences and identities. I am white, middle-class, able-bodied, cisgender, a US citizen, an English speaker, a settler who lives on the lands of the Kalapuya. I am the child of two public school teachers; I went to well-funded public schools, including an alternative middle school focused on the environment. My friends and I competed in a creative problem solving competition, *Odyssey of the Mind* (yes, nerd). I ran the sexual health fair at my university as an undergraduate. My mother likes to tell the story of how I resisted all her efforts to teach me to read as a child. I hated the flashcards and wanted her to just keep reading aloud to me every night—until one day I just...could read on my own. (I remember pulling books out late at night when everyone thought I was sleeping, which I'm sure was part of the learning.) All of these helped shape me as a learner and as a teacher, up to the time when I wrote my initial teaching statement.

Since then, I have taught hundreds of guest lectures, developed and taught credit-bearing courses, reworked other people's curricular materials. I have read and written and talked with other library and other academic workers about teaching. I attended ACRL's Instruction Immersion, a week-long training program for academic librarians in the basics of teaching, where shared concerns among participants led to other collaborations focused on more critical approaches to teaching in libraries. I debrief teaching sessions over drinks with my colleagues and catch up with former

students when I can. Instruction makes up a quarter of my current position duties—teaching is a solid part of what I do.

In addition to more lived experience as a teacher, my reading and learning has helped me deepen the view of myself captured in that statement. Just starting from that bulleted list above, I can think of how adrienne maree brown has taught me that “how we are at the small scale is how we are at the large scale” (2017, 52); focusing on doing right in small interactions can spiral outwards and upwards towards justice. I see why it thrilled me to read Myles Horton (1990) on bringing working class people together to solve thorny social problems together—and on the role of the teacher to provide resources as needed, while not getting in the way of the learning.

Of course, as much as I see alignment in terms of values and aims, there are also places where time reveals more significant changes. My reading and learning (and practice) have also challenged me and exposed where I needed to grow. While I said we need liberation with our joy, I didn’t name what we so badly need liberation *from*: from the imperialist, white supremacist patriarchy that bell hooks so clearly calls out as the backdrop for learning in the United States, where I live and teach. While I vaguely named economic concerns, I have a clearer sense of academic capitalism as an element of the critical consciousness I seek to engage in with learners (see, for example, Boggs et al. 2019). While my student self saw a clear line between DIY and liberation, it feels much murkier to me today, particularly operating within the university and the library specifically, institutions with fraught histories and goals (Yousefi 2019; Kelley 2016). I feel much more ambivalent about the library and any inherent goodness of my work (Ettarh 2018; Chiu, Ettarh, and Ferretti 2021); I am more cautious about causing harm.

Finally, while I acknowledged even then that logistical constraints may require more traditional forms of teaching—lecturing, or not offering time for all voices to be heard—I glossed over the difficulty of implementing my values. Since then, I have struggled with this in practice, and heard how broadly felt this is by other library workers. As a student writing my statement, I positioned the “instruction menu,” popular at the time, as an empowering way to remind disciplinary faculty that adding more content to a class session requires additional time (Benjes-Small and Brainard 2006). In my first full-time academic librarian job, I quickly realized that even a simple checklist frequently required a lot of work with faculty to really identify the learning outcomes needed. Over the years, my approach to negotiating learning content with faculty has shifted to be much more conversational, although I also no longer teach so many of the high volume, largely standardized one-shots that I did early in my career. I aspire to engage meaningfully with students, but the limitations of time, content, and faculty expectations are real. As I write this, I’m thinking

particularly of Sofia Leung's (2022) call for us to refuse information literacy in light of the stark limitations on what we can get done in a university—in an academic library—to make real change.

Over the months that I have been writing this piece, I have also been putting together a continuing education workshop on critical pedagogies. I find myself feeling the same sense of uncertainty and lack of confidence that I have felt so very many times as a teacher. Who am I to teach this? Do I really know what I'm doing? Have I, erm, *excelled as a teacher*, and if so, how? These uncertainties make it timely to reflect back over the role of teaching in my work. It grounds me to return to this statement and see that it turns out I have been pursuing these things for a long time. Praxis is the messy process of applying theory in practice, revising, and digging in again. I think about that as a stage of my evolution: DIY served as shorthand for something I didn't yet have other words for. When I think about the role of the teaching statement, it was a tool to get me to step into an identity as a teacher—to say, *hey, that is me*. And it feels tender to return again today and see that largely, I still am.

## Conclusion

To what end, then, does the teaching statement serve academic librarians? In writing and reworking this piece, I have found that my own statement of teaching is an anchor in understanding how I have mostly deepened my beliefs and grown in terms of approaches to my teaching. At the start of my career, it helped me recognize the experiences I already brought, and to project the future I wanted to explore. Since then, it has served as a touchstone to remind me of my values, and a place to pick from for formal writing about my teaching, including job applications and my tenure dossier. And it is that rare thing: the class assignment that I actually refer back to!

For academic librarians ambivalent about the role of teaching in their work, the teaching statement offers an opportunity to focus and articulate practices and aspirations. It also offers a way to align ourselves with others who teach—to be prepared to speak to our own approaches, beliefs, and successes, all of which come together to present a more or less coherent view of what we mean to do with our teaching. It seems excessive to add a statement of teaching to already onerous job applications, but interview questions and job talk prompts can elicit reflection on the same themes for library positions with significant teaching. Writing and revising teaching statements could be a part of departmental or library-wide teaching reflective practice, as recommended by Janelle Zauha (2008).

At the heart of it, the teaching statement offers a conscious practice of reflecting and documenting your teaching, a practice of revision and updating that can continue over the course of a career.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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