

What Is Your Philosophical Disposition? Standard X: The Teacher Has Developed an In-Depth Foundational Philosophy

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Dispositions are the values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors toward students, families, colleagues, and communities and affect student learning, motivation, and development as well as the educator's own professional growth. Dispositions are guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility, and social justice. For example, they might include a belief that all students can learn, a vision of high and challenging standards, or a commitment to a safe and supportive learning environment.¹

Media interest in the foundational preparation of the teaching profession reached a fevered pitch at the end of 2005. A philosophical term, very familiar to schools and colleges of education, became a concept of interest to the general public: *disposition*. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* summarized the stance of education professors: "Evaluating students' dispositions is important...because states hold them responsible for turning out prospective teachers who treat all schoolchildren fairly. They deny this turns professors into thought police."² A *Newsweek* column proclaimed, "Prospective teachers are expected to have the correct 'disposition,' proof of which is espousing 'progressive' political beliefs."³ In response, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) reiterated the responsibility of teacher preparation programs to demonstrate

that candidates know the research on teaching and learning, can employ effective teaching strategies and can, in fact, teach so that students learn. Accreditation requirements do expect that candidates exhibit two professional dispositions: fairness and the belief that all students can learn. As an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan accreditation agency, recognized by the federal government and nearly every state, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education does not itself espouse nor expect or require its institutions to espouse any particular political or social ideologies.⁴

The rhetorical style of the media dances around whether teachers "exhibit" or "espouse" particular *dispositions* based upon "beliefs" or "ideologies," simply avoiding the root of the matter. All teacher candidates and teachers have a philosophical stance on education. Equated with NCATE terminology, this philosophy is an expression of their dispositions.

If national standards for the education profession expected teacher candidates to develop an in-depth foundational philosophy of education, many of the concerns currently expressed about "dispositional standards" could be alleviated. Doing philosophy evokes established forms of thinking and expression, that is, habits of mind authentically practiced in the discipline of philosophy. Following a true philosophical process, the result would be an artifact conveying a foundational disposition free from the notion that the result was forced upon the author, the teacher candidate. A working definition provided by the American Philosophical Association supports this understanding of a philosophical disposition:

Philosophical inquiry by its very nature involves the attempt to think clearly and rigorously about difficult questions...Disagreement and criticism are among the hallmarks of philosophical life...It is precisely through such ongoing argument and debate that sophistication with respect to the issues at hand increases, comprehension of them deepens, and understanding concerning them is enhanced.⁵

Given the enormous role of “standards” within the epistemological frameworks now used to define the education profession and learning, adopting an expectation that teachers formally develop philosophies raises an important question. What is a philosophy of education and how can its defining characteristics be epistemologically defined to fit the twenty-first century language of standards?

A TRADITION OF TEACHERS ‘DOING’ PHILOSOPHY

In American schools, candidates for teaching positions are often asked about their philosophies during the interview process and in many cases are required to submit a written philosophy as part of their application materials. In 2006 over 55,000 websites featured “my philosophy of” education or teaching.⁶ The development of a document called “my philosophy” of education has been a tradition for teacher candidates dating back at least until the beginning of the last quarter of the twentieth century.

The difficulty in placing the origins of this tradition presents an interesting problem to be tackled by educational historians through examination of archives from American teacher preparation programs. In the first decade of the twentieth century William Bagley, while director of the University of Illinois School of Education, expressed concerns about the philosophical stance of teachers: “It is true that most of us are hopelessly obscure when we attempt to state the aim of education in any helpful or suggestive form...If we knew just what the outcome ought to be — if we could formulate our purpose clearly — could we not do our work of teaching better?”⁷ In 1910, he sent a survey to department heads of the 556 teacher preparation programs known to exist in America at the time. The open-ended responses in the final report give some sense of the historical shaping of the present tradition of a “my philosophy of education” artifact. Dakota Wesleyan University reported,

Each student is required to make an exposition and review of some standard treatise on ethics such as Spencer, Sidgwick, Kant. The assignments are different and, as the reviews are read, all obtain the various points of view. A strong effort, generally successful, is made to lead each student to find a central point of view and a life motive for himself.⁸

The Philadelphia Normal School for Girls indicated the intention of expanding the curricular emphasis on preparing teachers “to deal directly with ethical problems”:

Here the student studies children’s instincts and the conditions under which they develop into habits. She also studies the elements of voluntary action and the development of moral ideas in children and the race. A knowledge of the historical development of moral ideas and their effect on the welfare of society is influential in rousing in the prospective teacher a sense of moral responsibility, and it is proposed to give the subject more consideration in the future.⁹

Examining samples of “my philosophy” documents as they exist now shows the philosophical form to be summary in nature, exhibiting wide variation across a spectrum ranging from short, abstract-level texts to more comprehensive, rigorous texts. What should we call this form of philosophy, given its broad scope and condensed nature? Today, the classification “synthetic system building — philosophy

done in a ‘grand manner’,” identified by James Wheeler seems an appropriate taxonomic label.¹⁰ In the early twentieth century, the term educational or pedagogic “creed” was often used, as in this characterization by a state supervisor of elementary schools in Louisiana:

The resulting philosophy of education based on this formula of belief conditions directly or indirectly all educational endeavor. The educational creed, therefore, is the flywheel from which educational energy and understanding are radiated....The formula becomes more lucid and takes more definite and satisfying form when the type of education necessary to bring about the greatest possible improvement in each individual has been defined, and the conditions for its realization, no matter how idealistic, have been determined.¹¹

The influence which John Dewey’s 1897 essay “My Pedagogic Creed,” had on the development of this “synthetic system building” philosophical form should not be underestimated.¹² Appearing in *School Journal*, which had a large circulation, it was also distributed in pamphlet form by the E.L. Kellogg Company, which facilitated its use in teacher preparation programs before the advent of copy machines. Fitting on four pages, this relatively short encapsulation of a comprehensive philosophical stance totaling 4,087 words may well be the historical exemplar which has had the most influence on this philosophical form as practiced by teachers. Methodological characterizations of philosophical forms often include reference to ‘is’ and ‘ought to’ premises which are easily found throughout Dewey’s classic piece organized around a “grand scale” system of five strands: education, school, curriculum, method, and society.

In positioning the “my philosophy” form as a teacher-authored genre, it is important to note some historical trends in the exposure of teachers to philosophical writing. In the early years of teacher preparation programs, it was quite common for teacher candidates to read whole books by major philosophical thinkers. By the middle of the twentieth century, massive primary source anthologies of writings on education appeared, still giving readers exposure to the philosophical voice of the author.¹³ By the last quarter of the century, the massive “surface-summary” textbook form in educational foundations began to arrive on the scene, essentially devoid of primary source voices except for brief quotes and a few significant excerpts scattered throughout. In a critique of this new type of foundations text and the implication for encouraging a philosophical disposition, Steve Tozer and Stuart McAninch comment “people do not develop philosophies by seeing sketches of them,” where “much is declared and little is explained” and “history is presented as a list of events, sociology as a list of research findings, and philosophy as a list of ideas.”¹⁴

Also in the last quarter of the century, the popularization of taking on the writing of philosophy oneself rather than simply studying it emerged. In 1967, Philip G. Smith in *Philosophy of Education*, a text for teacher education programs, invited teacher candidates to do “philosophy as an activity” noting it was “not uncommon to hear British philosophers speak of *doing philosophy*.”¹⁵ At the turn of the twenty-first century, Nel Noddings’s text by the same name also remarks that traditionally “philosophical methods have consisted of analysis and clarification,” but that “there are signs that philosophers may once again invite their students to join in the

immortal conversation.” Although she does not explicitly direct teachers or teacher candidates on how to methodologically shape their philosophies, the implicit invitation is always present as the gentle invocation that “in each discussion we will try to ‘do’ a bit of philosophy.”¹⁶

In 2006, a major textbook in foundations (market price over ninety dollars and published in multiple editions with annual sales in the thousands) incorporated “doing” philosophy for the first time as a consistent strand of every chapter, with Tozer as lead author nearly two decades after he critiqued the new massive “surface-summary” foundations texts. The philosophical guide starts in the first chapter:

You will find it useful, after reading this chapter, if you take 15 minutes or so to record your thinking so that you have a sketch of your philosophy of education at this point in time: a sketch that you will have a chance to develop and revise for the remainder of this volume and for years to come. One way to frame this sketch is simply to respond to the following: What are your goals for your students; how will you achieve those goals; and what are your reasons for those goals and methods? You may if you like, use the concepts of knowledge, skills, and dispositions as ways to help you think about your goals. Your justifications might address what you think is good for a person’s happiness and fulfillment as an individual, and they might also address (like Aristotle) what kind of society you wish to contribute to with your educational practice. In each chapter, there will be a section like this called, “Building a Philosophy of Education,” that will provide you an opportunity to become increasingly thoughtful, purposeful, and clear about your educational ideas....Developing a coherent educational philosophy will not only make your understanding and values clearer to you; that clarity will surely guide the day-to-day choices you make.¹⁷

In 1997¹⁸ and 2004 the same publishing company also released two short workbooks on “Writing a Philosophy,” promoted as supplements “designed for use in any foundations course” or to “help colleges of education meet NCATE standards requirements” as exemplified in the following table of contents:

- Five Philosophical Approaches
- Identifying Your Philosophical Approach
- Organizing Your Data
- How to Write a Philosophy of Education Statement
- Practical Use of Your Philosophy of Education Statement
- Historical Aspects of Five Philosophical Approaches to Teaching
- Table of Philosophic Ideas — Supplemental Websites¹⁹

Foundations scholars might cringe at such cursory, technical writing guides, yet the conference tables of university faculty meetings abound with comments of frustration related to the writing process of teacher candidates. The decline in the use of primary source texts by influential historical writers in education leaves teacher candidates without an intense immersion in the reading experience of elegant philosophical prose and its inextricable link to the cultivation of an elegant philosophical writing process.

As renewed attention to ‘doing’ philosophy emerges in teacher preparation programs at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is interesting to note that higher education had already begun to focus on the ‘doing’ philosophy form for all of its faculty in the last decade of the twentieth century. Concern had begun to

emerge in Tier 1 institutions, where graduate students are often given full responsibility for the teaching of undergraduate survey lecture and lab courses across the disciplines, about the quality of university teaching. University units called “teaching and learning centers” began to emerge.²⁰ Initially intended to serve graduate student instructors, their role rapidly expanded as professional development centers for all faculty. Since pedagogic literature related to higher education was sparse, these centers initially drew heavily from scholarship related to the teaching profession, including assessment concepts associated with the portfolio movement. This infusion of ideas gave the traditional faculty annual review process a more focused foundation that included the notion that a philosophical stance was necessary.

Today, as a standard requirement in many colleges and universities, all faculty must develop a “philosophy of education.” Since thinking deeply about the education process was frequently a new type of activity for university faculty outside the education field, teaching and learning centers began to develop inspirational, comforting guides for faculty. Iowa State University provides a provocative systems framework explained in a manner which would probably appeal to many foundations faculty: (1) To what end? (2) By what means? (3) To what degree? and (4) Why?²¹

In many disciplines this new ‘doing’ philosophy activity seems to be approached with a fair degree of unintimidated introspection; however faculty in schools and colleges of education might feel the additional pressure of being caught in an ironic panopticon where ‘the teachers are watching.’²² Yet, despite the ‘doing’ philosophy activity having recently become a standard for university faculty, and the de facto assumption of a “my philosophy” stance spanning decades in the teaching profession, faculty in teacher preparation programs have yet to canonize this activity as a foundationally shepherded intellectual framework addressing the education profession’s ‘eight-hundred-pound gorilla in the living room’ dispositions. Today, the act of writing a philosophy often resides outside the guidance of foundations faculty, usually occurring during clinical supervision of field observations and student teaching, one of many tasks to be completed by teacher candidates during these frenetic periods.

AMERICA’S “SYNTHETIC SYSTEM BUILDING” PHILOSOPHY FOR THE EDUCATION PROFESSION

To focus on how a philosophical disposition fits into the teaching profession, we need to understand the current holistic philosophical framing of the profession. The national standards movement over the past two decades has greatly influenced an evolution towards the definition of teaching as a profession although the notion of ‘craft’ still lingers.

As with the national standards organizations for the disciplines, national standards for the profession have evolved through a similar democratic process using national panel discussions and regionally hosted forums in an effort to achieve consensus. Today, virtually all full-time faculty in American higher education departments, schools, and colleges of education have participated in an accreditation process influenced by these national standards.

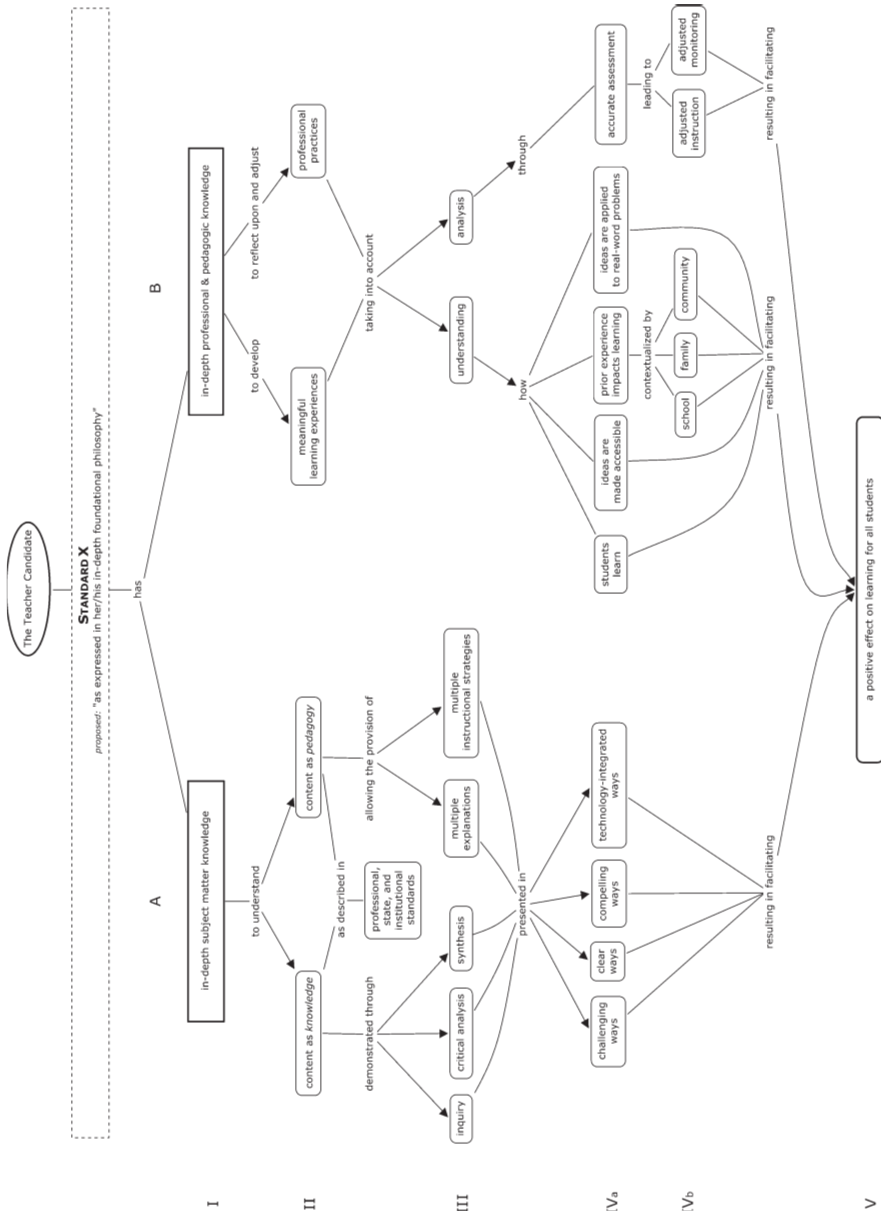


FIGURE 1. A CONCEPT MAP ANALYSIS OF NCATE STANDARD 1 DEPICTING THE GRAND PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHER CANDIDATES WITH ROMAN NUMERALS I THROUGH V REPRESENTING DEEPENING EPISTEMOLOGICAL LEVELS (CONCEPT WORDS AND PHRASES ARE DRAWN DIRECTLY FROM NCATE STANDARDS).²³

In essence these professional standards define a metasynthetic system-building philosophical framework for American teachers. Figure 1 presents the text of the NCATE standards as an epistemological structure. If one looks back to Horace

Mann's 1840 thinking about teaching, it is quite impressive how cleanly strands A and B map to Mann's first two premises, as well as his third and fifth.

- NCATE A-I: Teachers should have a perfect knowledge of the rudimental branches which are required by law to be taught in our schools...This knowledge should not only be thorough and critical, but it should be always ready, at command, for every exigency — familiar like the alphabet, so that, as occasion requires, it will rise up in the mind instantaneously, and not need to be studied out, with labor and delay. [Mann-1]
- NCATE A-II: Teachers should be able to teach *subjects*, not manuals merely. [Mann-1]
- NCATE A-III: The leading, prevailing defect in the intellectual department of our schools is a want of thoroughness — a proneness to be satisfied with...a knowledge of names of things, instead of a knowledge of the things themselves — or if some knowledge of the things is gained, it is too likely to be a knowledge of them as isolated facts, and unaccompanied by a knowledge of the relations which subsist between them, and bind them into a scientific whole. [Mann-1]
- NCATE A-IV: Great discretion is necessary in the assignment of lessons in order to avoid, on the one hand, such shortness in the tasks as allows time to be idle; and on the other hand, such over-assignments as render thoroughness and accuracy impracticable, and thereby so habituate the pupil to mistakes and imperfections, that he cares little or nothing about committing them. [Mann-3]
- NCATE B-I: The ability to acquire, and the ability to impart, are wholly different talents. [Mann-2]
- NCATE B-II: Aptness to teach involves the power of perceiving how far a scholar understands the subject-matter to be learned, and what, in the natural order, is the next step he is to take. [Mann-2]
- NCATE B-III: He who is apt to teach is acquainted, not only with common methods for common minds, but with peculiar methods for pupils of peculiar dispositions and temperaments... [Mann-2]
- NCATE B-IV: [H]e is acquainted with the principles of all methods, whereby he can vary his plan, according to any difference of circumstances. The statement has been sometimes made, that it is the object of Normal Schools to subject all teachers to one, inflexible, immutable course of instruction. Nothing could be more erroneous, for one of the great objects is to give them a knowledge of modes, as various as the diversity of cases that may arise—that like a skillful pilot, they may not only see the haven for which they are to steer, but every bend in the channel that leads to it. [Mann-2]
- NCATE V: Every person, therefore, who endorses another's character, as one befitting a school teacher, stands before the public as his moral bondsman and sponsor, and should be held to a rigid accountability.²⁴ [Mann-5]

Although the ontology is quite different across a span of more than 160 years, there is comfort in seeing such continuity in the major underlying premises. It is a ruggedly open, synthetic system-building philosophical framework which still leaves enormous room for teacher candidates to “join in the immortal conversation” while developing their foundational philosophies. The mark of involvement by members of the Council for Social Foundations of Education in both the conceptualization of the framework, as well as the foundational process schools and colleges enter into as they renew and hone their unit philosophies, is clearly visible in its foundational nature.²⁵ But there is more work to be done, as the role of dispositions ought to be firmly seated on strong grounds within the framework.

“MY PHILOSOPHY” — A RIGOROUS DISPOSITION

Although teacher candidates have been producing the “my philosophy of education” synthetic system form in teacher preparation programs for at least thirty

years, it has suffered from a lack of attention by foundations faculty. Collaboration by a diverse group of foundations scholars is necessary to achieve initial consensus on how to intellectually harness this tradition within the foundations programs to:

- define and foster the rigorous, true nature of such a philosophical form;
- consider how such a project is situated within the curriculum and scales to incorporate the various foundations disciplines in schools and colleges of education;
- define how such a philosophical form is tied to practice — a distasteful notion to some foundations scholars; and
- decide whether, after careful consideration and widespread discussion, the concept is worth pursuing with all the attendant work required to incorporate it in a future version of the national standards.

There are already a number of foundations faculty, scattered across America, who have been framing the writing of philosophy in their courses in a variety of ways. There are also a number of programs that have decided that the notion of a philosophy project is a sensible solution to the ‘dispositions problem’ (although

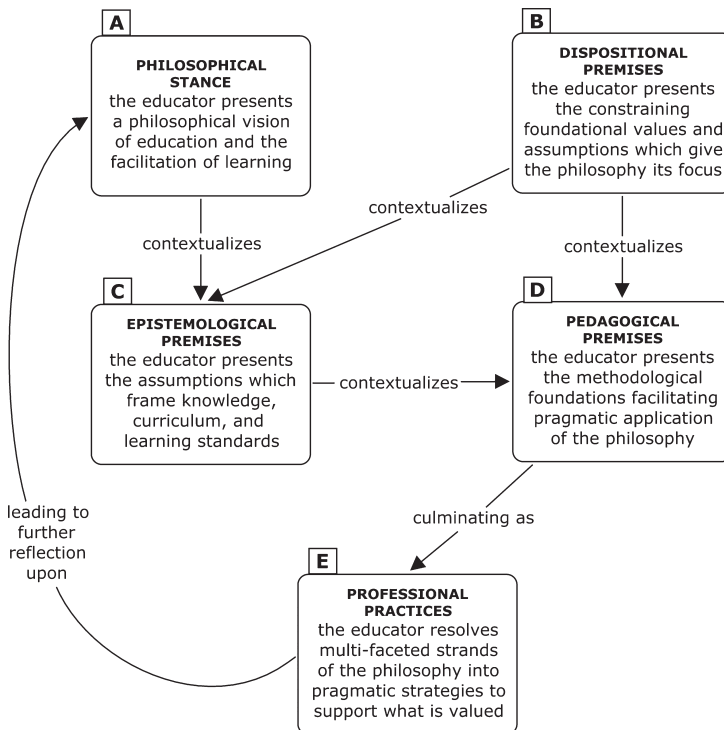


FIGURE 2. A “DOING PHILOSOPHY” MODEL FOR TEACHER CANDIDATES ADAPTED FROM WILLIAM FRANKENA’S FRAMEWORK.²⁶

these requirements do not necessarily have a direct link to work in foundations courses). Yet committing to fostering the development of a *strong* philosophy by teacher candidates is not a trivial undertaking. Many foundations faculty would scoff at the *weak* nature of foundational thought expressed in many of the “my philosophy” form artifacts produced today. This is to be expected, as the development, in many cases, was not guided by foundational studies. To ‘raise the bar’ on this existing tradition and position it prominently as a deserved centerpiece in the canon of teacher preparation curriculum might serve to give foundations faculty a new sense of purpose. Increased recognition of the importance of foundational thought by both colleagues and teacher candidates might also result.

In framing such a project, considerable attention needs to be focused on identifying a way of communicating the nature of the philosophical form so that it can be understood by anyone, for example colleagues in disciplines outside of foundations. Arthur Brown provides an interesting history of the changes in his philosophy of teaching an introduction to the philosophy of education over a span of thirty years, starting with a lecture/examination format and evolving to a ‘doing’ philosophy format.²⁷ His use of William Frankena’s often-cited model for analyzing a philosophy of education prompts the possibility of its adaptation as a rubric scheme to communicate the grand, synthetic system-building nature of the “my philosophy” form, a rather different form than more focused philosophical writings. In Figure 2 the scheme has been modified to model both the individual philosophical form as well as the NCATE meta-form within which it inhabits philosophical space. Many examples of the foundationally uninformed “my philosophy” forms being produced today tend to exhibit *weak* epistemological (C), pedagogical (D), and professional (E) characteristics. With foundational guidance, these forms could be grown to exhibit “grand manner” (ABCDE) characteristics that project a *strong* “my philosophy.”

MAKING THE ‘OUGHT TO’ AN ‘IS’

Philosophy often uses the ought/is dichotomy, and as such this piece playfully ends...

Historically and consistently lurking in the ontology of the American teaching profession *is* the notion of having a philosophy of education.

Educational foundations *ought to* shape this tradition so as to facilitate the development of a strong, philosophical disposition in all teachers.

1. National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), “Unit Standards Glossary” (2006), <http://ncate.org/boe/glossary.asp?ch=155#D>.

2. Robin Wilson, “‘We Don’t Need That Kind of Attitude’: Education Schools Want to Make Sure Prospective Teachers Have the Right ‘Disposition,’” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, no. 17 (2005), A8.

3. George F. Will, “Ed Schools versus Education,” *Newsweek* 147, no. 3 (2006), 98.

4. Arthur E. Wise, “Mail Call: The Truth About Teaching,” *Newsweek* 147, no. 5 (2006), 21.

5. Richard Schacht, “APA Statements on the Profession: Research in Philosophy,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 70, no. 2 (1996), 120–21.

6. A web search using <http://google.com> on October 11, 2006, yielded approximately 31,100 sites for “my philosophy of education” and 24,500 sites for “my philosophy of teaching.”
7. William C. Bagley, “The Outcomes of Teaching,” *School and Home Education* 31 (1911), 52–3.
8. William C. Bagley, “Training Public School Teachers: The Present Status of Moral Education in Institutions for the Training of Teachers,” *Religious Education* 5 (1910–1911), 617.
9. *Ibid.*, 620–21.
10. James E. Wheeler, “Philosophical and Social Framework of Education,” *Review of Educational Research* 37, no. 1 (1967), 5.
11. J.W. Brouillette, “The Educational Belief of a State Supervisor,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 14, no. 5 (1937), 238.
12. John Dewey, “My Pedagogic Creed,” *School Journal* 54, no. 3 (1897): 77–80.
13. An exemplar of the comprehensive anthology from this period is S. Alexander Rippa’s *Educational Ideas in America: A Documentary History* (New York: David McKay, 1969), totaling over 600 pages, including over 100 “whole, or at least a major part of each document selected.”
14. Steve Tozer and Stuart McAninch, “Four Texts in Social Foundations of Education in Historical Perspective,” *Educational Studies: A Journal in the Foundations of Education* 18, no. 1 (1987), 18 and 20.
15. Philip G. Smith, *Philosophy of Education: Introductory Studies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 2–3.
16. Nel Noddings, *Philosophy of Education*, 2d ed. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2007), xiii and 166.
17. Steven E. Tozer, Guy Senese, and Paul C. Violas, *School and Society: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 17.
18. Jill Stamm, *Philosophy of Education Workbook: Writing a Statement of Beliefs and Practices* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997).
19. Caroline R. Pryor, *Writing a Philosophy Statement: An Educator’s Workbook*, 2d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004).
20. Hofstra University hosts a central index of higher education teaching and learning centers. See http://www.hofstra.edu/faculty/ctse/cte_links.cfm.
21. Lee Haugen, *Writing a Teaching Philosophy Statement* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University, 1998), <http://www.celt.iastate.edu/teaching/philosophy.html>.
22. This is a wordplay employing Jeremy Bentham’s 1791 model of the circular Panopticon where guards watch the prisoners who in turn watch the guards (made famous in postmodern philosophy by Michel Foucault’s 1975 *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [New York: Random House]), while also alluding to Theodore and Nancy Sizer’s 1999 *The Students Are Watching: Schools and the Moral Contract* (Boston: Beacon Press).
23. Author’s concept map drawn from a close analysis of the NCATE 2006 Unit Standards text of “Standard 1: Candidate Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions,” http://ncate.org/documents/standards/unit_stnds_2006.pdf.
24. Horace Mann, “Fourth Annual Report — 1840” in *The Republic and The School*, ed. Lawrence A. Cremin (New York: Teachers College Press, 1957), 44–52 (gender use in original).
25. Erskine Dottin, Alan Jones, Douglas Simpson, and Joseph Watras, “Representing the Social Foundations of Education in NCATE: A Chronicle of Twenty-Five Years of Effort,” *Educational Studies: A Journal of the American Educational Studies Association* 38, no. 3 (2005): 241–54.
26. Author’s adaptation of the model depicted in William K. Frankena, “A Model for Analyzing a Philosophy of Education,” in *Readings in the Philosophy of Education: A Study of Curriculum*, ed. Jane R. Martin (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1970), 15–22.
27. Arthur Brown, “The Introductory Course in Philosophy of Education,” *Proceedings of the Midwest Philosophy of Education Society: 1995–1996* (1997): 59–68, <http://eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED413282>.