

## Current Perspectives on SOTL

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### Introduction

The concept of scholarship is central to the roles and overarching functions of universities and, as such, obviously influences policy and practice in higher education throughout the world. However the role of 'the university' and consequently, higher education, is changing, and that change is driven by changes in society and changes in communication which in turn are largely being driven by technological advances, and changes in the expectations of the student population. While universities are often characterized by their resistance to change, the shifting dynamics of society in general may make it impossible for them to continue with a business as usual mentality, or simply to see greater levels of managerialism and top-down directives as the alternative to, or the placebo for, meaningful change.

The advances in information technologies and communication are already profoundly influencing the ways in which academic staff and students engage with the world, giving weight to the idea that traditional institutional ways of being will need to shift quite dramatically to keep pace with wider societal and economic changes. This could have an interesting impact on our methods of scholarship.

The fundamental processes of knowledge creation, preservation, integration, transmission and application will continue to change in unexpected and unforeseen ways. For example academic staff will come to understand that their role as teachers has shifted from providers of knowledge content to facilitators of student learning, and that this facilitatory responsibility involves less traditional classroom teaching and more of a focus on designing learning experiences, processes and environments (Stefani and Nicol 1996, Duderstadt, 2000)

Academic staff are being put under considerable pressure to engage in traditional discipline-based research, to secure research funding and produce a required number of publications per year. While it may be argued that this has always been the case, the pressure in recent times has been exacerbated by the growth of league tables which seem often to be based more on measures of research excellence than on student learning outcomes.

Notwithstanding the corrosive effect that this has had with respect to the importance of the teaching mission of the university, the focus that universities have had on the research performance of the individual academic within a particular discipline is fast becoming an outmoded paradigm.

There is an interesting and necessary change in the dynamics of research activity with the idea of *integration* coming to the forefront. Research teams are no longer necessarily grounded within one disciplinary domain. Research collaboration is occurring across multiple organizations, sectors and disciplines, creating the capacity to solve complex 21<sup>st</sup> century problems. Research teams are becoming more diffuse and again, in part, this is because of the impact of new technologies enabling communication between practitioners, researchers and scholars. Holland (2005) defines this new paradigm as the *scholarship of*

*engagement* and argues that this shift in research dynamics is also 'having an impact on the growing integration of teaching and research, and requires us to view scholarly work as a holistic enterprise and to create a different vision of academic excellence'.

At the same time, there is growing criticism that universities have lost their way: universities may need to restate, rethink or resituate their wider mission and role in society. Universities don't just exist to produce economic benefit or to act as if they are research institutions. They also have a role to play in providing equity, social cohesion and social justice. The recent and current obsession with league tables and ratings largely based on the research standing of institutions has the potential to impact negatively in terms of the wider functions of the university.

### **Interrogating the Status and Influence of SoTL**

It is not news to say that an obsession with research ratings has had a corrosive effect on the importance institutions give to teaching. Ernest Boyer's work (1990) was a serious and scholarly approach to re-interpret scholarship, to move away from 'the rigid academic silos of research, teaching and service into the more nuanced and interactive domains of discovery, teaching, engagement and integration' (Holland, 2005).

It is unlikely that Boyer intended the four forms of scholarship he identified to be seen as separate and distinct intellectual functions. Rather, he considered that academics are first and foremost scholars, and that there happen to be different but interlocking forms of scholarship. It is two decades since Boyer's seminal work was published and much has changed in academic life since then.

While writing this short essay on the current status of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for this, the fifth anniversary of our Journal, I re-read all of the excellent essays that have been published here to date. On reading these essays *en mass*, I found myself wondering if, as a community of scholars, we are not laboring too much on the finer nuances of a definition of the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Perhaps an anecdote will best explain this view. A few years ago a very senior academic said to me that she did not believe in the scholarship of teaching and learning, it was far too slippery a concept that nobody seemed to be able to clearly define. My response was that in a prestigious institution, with around 35,000 students and laying claim to *research-led, student-centred teaching*, this was an extraordinary statement of the lack of value being attached to the scholarship of teaching and learning. As time went by, however, this same senior academic gave many presentations to different audiences both within and associated with the University. Almost always the scholarship of teaching and learning was mentioned.

There are two points to make from this anecdote, the first being the issue of definitions. We need to ask ourselves, are we limiting our potential to drive scholarship forward in changing times, circumstances and environments by presenting multiple definitions and explanations of SoTL? The second point relates to using the term 'scholarship of teaching and learning' as a mantra, as a means of giving teaching and learning greater symbolic capital (Nicholls p57) without actually interrogating the underlying principles of scholarship and what it means in practice to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning. These two trends are in essence contradictory – too much information, too many definitions and nuances versus too little interrogation of the meaning of SoTL. This presents something of a dilemma for the SoTL community of practitioners.

Any conceptualization of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning needs to take into consideration the fundamental purpose of 'the university' in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. A tension has entered into the debate on the purpose of the university. On the one hand, the 'information age', the idea of knowledge transfer and the rapid accumulation of knowledge in a digital age, makes it barely possible to keep up to date with all of the advances in any discipline. Yet the core and fundamental concepts within a disciplinary domain need to be understood if the students of today are to be the leaders and scholars in their field tomorrow. On the other hand, to become lifelong learners, it is critical that learning is about much more than acquiring the ability to recount current subject knowledge and understanding. Learners of today, potential scholars of the future need to: develop their abilities to apply their knowledge to new and unforeseen problems (the scholarship of application); seek out, evaluate and integrate knowledge and information from different disciplinary areas in order to make their way through complexity (the scholarship of integration); promote the discovery of innovative solutions to 21<sup>st</sup> century problems through research and creativity (the scholarship of discovery), and understand how to facilitate learning in ways that promote meaningful educational transformation (the scholarship of teaching and learning?).

On re-reading the many essays on SoTL from the inception of our Journal to the present time, I was struck by the passion with which many authors make a plea for the wider purpose of 'the university' - to provide or promote equity, social cohesion and social justice - to be encompassed within the concept and practice of SoTL. For example, Brenda Liebowitz in her excellent 'Perspective from the South' essay (2010) makes comment on 'the important role higher education has to play in contributing to the development of an economically successful and democratic society'.

Taking the challenges for higher education in post-apartheid South Africa as the context, Liebowitz suggests that 'those who wish to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning need to take into account, and respond to, broader social issues'. Carolin Kreber (2007) states, 'given the challenges of our times, the 'subject' (in a disciplinary domain) needs to be understood more broadly, including next to the knowledge, skills and attitudes specific to particular subject areas, the much needed generic knowledge areas and skills necessary for students to participate effectively in their later civic, professional and personal lives'. Richard Gale in his insightful essay "Asking Questions that Matter...Asking Questions of Value" (2009) talks about Level One, Two and Three Scholarship with Level Three 'asking questions about student learning that speak to and influence issues of significance to society, addressing our values writ large, what we need to understand as members of a local, national, global community.' An excellent example of this which he suggests is 'what if students learned biochemistry through social issues such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis, influenza and malnutrition?' This approach to facilitating student learning would provide authentic learning experiences with significance way beyond the classroom.

A final example of SoTL encompassing wider social values that I will plunder from previous essays comes from Ian Scott's "Towards an Agenda for SoTL in Africa?" (2009). Scott outlines the challenges facing education at all levels in sub-Saharan African countries, not least of all that of widening successful participation, access accompanied by equity of outcomes. He argues that the challenges notwithstanding, 'higher education cannot absolve itself of its social obligation to be willing to consider the effectiveness of its traditional practices for meeting contemporary needs in the local and regional context, without devaluing the principles of scholarship'.

What comes through strongly from these stimulating and thought provoking essays and articles is a collective plea for meaningful change of mindset with regard to preparing our graduates for an uncertain and rapidly changing world, and preparing our future scholars.

The authors are not envisaging that we turn back the academic clock; rather it seems that there is a need for us to re-assert in a manner appropriate to the times in which we operate those essential values associated with the public good of a university education.

The shifting values of the university have arisen as a result of globalization and the emphasis being put on the knowledge economy. As Bok (2003, p200) puts it in his book *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education*, - making money in the world of commerce often comes with a Faustian bargain in which universities have to compromise their basic values – and thereby risk their very souls – in order to enjoy the rewards of the marketplace.

However, if knowledge and knowledge co-creation represent the new cultural capital, and universities are seen as key stakeholders in knowledge creation, then we need perhaps to raise the question, why is the learning process for students engaging in university courses and programs not more authentic, more aligned to a holistic and integrative interpretation of Boyer's four pillars of scholarship? This surely would bridge the gap between teaching and research and go some way to pulling back on the hysteria being promoted within universities over research performance. It would also better prepare students for the challenging world they will face on completion of their university studies and it might create a much more authentic learning experience for our students. The tension here may be between market forces and the principles of scholarship, convenience and standardization versus quality as we currently understand it.

The essays, articles and commentaries on SoTL published in this Journal over the past five years amount to an impressive body of work. The SoTL community of practice is growing all the time as is evidenced by the conferences, projects, books and other scholarly outputs. But this raises other issues and questions. While we are seeing incremental changes in colleges and universities regarding the importance of learning and teaching, the overall picture is still quite disappointing. What impact is the SoTL community making at senior level within our institutions? How can we use our impressive body of work to influence meaningful change across our institutions? How do we use our work to influence the debate not just on SoTL alone but on the overarching purpose of the university in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?

As SoTL scholars, we need to consider the question of where to from here with the increasing pressure from market forces and governments and the tensions mentioned above? It is often the case that the most creative solutions to major issues arise in times of strife. But we must work at keeping the scholarship of teaching and learning alive in a period when major restructuring is basically being forced on the higher education sector by economic measures and other 'extrinsic' factors.

How do we get back to the future, recapture our mission and develop our students in such a way that we prepare them for global citizenship in such uncertain times?

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