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Abstract

This study explores the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) as a form of troublesome knowledge (Perkins 1999) that continues to trouble its practitioners. Forty-eight higher education professionals from six countries described their understanding of SoTL in an online survey; ten individuals participated in follow-up interviews to consider how SoTL experiences shape, support, or hinder academic identity and knowing. We categorize our findings according to the dynamic factors—personal, relational, and contextual—identified by Lief et al (2012); we argue that SoTL serves to illuminate and expose tensions created by competing values and that these values can lead to, or create, a troublesome space wherein promoting SoTL can be enabling and disabling.

Keywords

higher education, academic identity, troublesome knowledge, scholarship of teaching and learning

Troublesome Knowledge of SoTL

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This study explores the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) as a form of troublesome knowledge (Perkins 1999) that continues to trouble its practitioners. Forty-eight higher education professionals from six countries described their understanding of SoTL in an online survey; ten individuals participated in follow-up interviews to consider how SoTL experiences shape, support, or hinder academic identity and knowing. We categorize our findings according to the dynamic factors—personal, relational, and contextual—identified by Lief et al (2012); we argue that SoTL serves to illuminate and expose tensions created by competing values and that these values can lead to, or create, a troublesome space wherein promoting SoTL can be enabling and disabling.

INTRODUCTION

While the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) is an emerging field of inquiry in higher education and has received increased attention in the literature, there is much debate around the definition of SoTL and how topics in SoTL need to be investigated and evidenced (Shulman 1999; Prosser and Trigwell 1999; Hutchings 2000; Kreber 2002; McKinney 2007; Felten 2013). Research into SoTL has revealed that the questions we ask, or fail to ask, as researchers influence the shape and form of SoTL output (Gurung, Chick and Haynie 2008; Kreber 2013). McKinney (2015) recently suggested that the field itself has become stalled in these definitional debates. Felten (2013) has argued that despite, or indeed because of, the multiple definitions of SoTL, several principles need to underpin SoTL inquiry: it is 1) inquiry into student learning, (2) grounded in context, (3) methodologically sound, (4) conducted in partnership with students, and (5) appropriately public. Fanghanel (2013) attempted to shift the terms of the debate by arguing that the definition of SoTL is less important than what it can do and what it has become. That is, SoTL has the potential to become a vehicle for transition, inquiry, and growth, working between disciplines and sharing a common practice.

Higher education professionals who self-identify as producing or consuming SoTL literature, however, continue to identify tension within this practice. Indeed, even the obsession with definitions indicates that many individuals interested in the field find SoTL troublesome, though the particular nature of the trouble likely varies depending on factors like disciplinary, institutional and national contexts. SoTL is often framed as a North American phenomenon although gatherings like EuroSoTL are bridging some of these boundaries, enabling practitioners to further discuss barriers and opportunities for continuing scholarly activity within a SoTL framework (Abrahamson 2015). Still, the term SoTL itself may be alien and so may present individuals with troublesome understandings about their own practice. Arguing for a pragmatic approach to constructivism, Perkins (1999) identified variations of troublesome knowledge. Perkins (2012) later suggested that some epistemes may be troublesome.

In this paper we probe the troublesome nature of SoTL more deeply by exploring different domains of academic identity, through reflection and reflective practice in order to assess how these constructs interact and/or interfere with each other. This more nuanced description of how SoTL troubles its practitioners may help individuals cope with the anxiety and doubt that accompany epistemic shifts. After all, as Schön (2001) notes, naming and framing

are crucial parts of critical reflection and reflective practices. Reflection enables practitioners to consider the components of their beliefs and work towards different understandings within their academic roles and identities. However, as Moon (1999) illustrated, reflection is remarkably complex given variations in definition, experience, purpose, and context. This paper explores higher education professionals' reflections upon SoTL, hoping to contribute to a dialogue around the value, and valuing, of SoTL. We argue that while study participants valued SoTL cognitively and affectively, they also identified competing values both in terms of disciplinary practices and institutional demands.

In this examination we build on work around SoTL and threshold concepts developed with Simmons et al (2013). From a social identity theory perspective (Tajfel 2010), Simmons et al. (2013) examined how SoTL affects the formation of academic identities through the creation of a reflective liminal space. Meyer and Land (2005) described such a space as liquid, "simultaneously transforming and being transformed by the learner as he or she moves through it" (p. 380). Transformation is one defining feature of a threshold concept as "threshold concepts lead not only to transformed thought but to a transfiguration of identity and adoption of an extended discourse" (Meyer and Land, 2005, 375). Threshold concepts are often described as a step into a new way of knowing where the troublesomeness dissolves. The faculty member is positioned as disciplinary expert looking back at or, perhaps more accurately, retrospectively imagining a state before knowledge from the other side (MacLean 2009). However, Simmons et al. (2013) did not identify a specific concept that marked a transition to SoTL practitioner. Rather, SoTL was seen as troublesome knowledge that continues to trouble practitioners.

This paper explores the troublesome nature of SoTL further. Motivated by an interest in how academics choose to portray their identity, we draw on data from an on-line survey and semi-structured interviews to consider how SoTL experiences shape, support, or hinder academic identity and knowing. How do self-identified SoTL practitioners describe SoTL and academic identity? How do these descriptions differ from the established literature and research on SoTL? We categorize our findings according to the dynamic factors—personal, relational, and contextual—identified by Lief et al (2012); we argue that SoTL serves to illuminate and expose tensions created by competing values and that these values can lead to, or create, a troublesome space wherein promoting SoTL can be both enabling and disabling.

METHOD

Forty-two higher education professionals in six countries (Australia, Canada, Norway, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States) participated in an online survey distributed through a variety of higher education list-servs; thirty-four participants (81%) were from North America. The preface identified the survey as gathering “information on academic experiences around the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), including challenges, opportunities, and identity.” Thus, people taking the survey were likely already involved in some capacity with SoTL. Twenty-eight were in teaching-focused roles, another eight described their work as academic or faculty development, four had primarily administrative roles at the dean or director level, and there were two other participants. In a series of open-ended questions, participants were asked to describe their academic identities by emphasizing main areas of work and recognition; the survey questions are provided in the appendix. They were asked about their understanding of SoTL and their work in relationship to SoTL. They were also asked about disciplinary and institutional support/obstacles of SoTL. The survey provided individuals with the option of volunteering for a follow-up interview. Ten individuals participated in semi-structured interviews to delve deeper into questions about synergies and conflicts in the different parts of their academic identities. One interviewee was from the UK; the rest were from North America. We used the survey responses as prompts during the interviews. The survey questions and interview structure were reviewed and approved by the Mount Royal University Human Research Ethics Board and the University of East London Research Ethics Committee. All interview responses were recorded and transcribed. Participants were asked to review and check the transcripts for accuracy. Participants were made aware that participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study.

Analysis

We began by reading through the survey answers, looking both for recurring patterns and variations from patterns. When asked about the relationships between academic and SoTL identities, the majority of our respondents claimed that there was no difference or described the identities as blended or intertwined. The majority of respondents also said there was at least verbal, if not monetary, support for SoTL at their institutions; however, most also identified tension between discipline and SoTL activities. Indeed, only 13 of 42 (31%) said there was no tension, sometimes framed as “not for me” or “not in this role,” frames that acknowledge tension exists for others. Yet if there is institutional support, at least in name, where is this tension coming from? One recurring theme not specific to SoTL involves workload and time. A number of participants, however, identified bias against SoTL in their academic contexts. One participant called it the “ugly step-sister of the academic family.” Sometimes the bias is seen as disciplinary-based, sometimes methodological. The tension is often framed in terms of values, including the relative value of SoTL publication as currency in the academy. SoTL is widely perceived to “count less” than other types of scholarly publication for tenure and promotion. Other participants talked about their colleagues’ reactions to SoTL.

We were able to probe some of these tensions and relationships more deeply in the ten semi-structured interviews. Here we used a form of template analysis as we coded transcripts, identi-

fying themes. King (2004) describes template analysis as a set of techniques for thematically organizing data. Some of the themes can be a priori though modified and interpreted by the researchers. We coded the same data independently, meeting to share our interpretations, reflect on the process, and develop our themes further. As we worked through the interviews, we found the framework described by Lieff et al. (2012) helpful. Lieff and colleagues examined the academic identity formation of participants within a faculty development program. They identified three dynamic domains: personal; relational; and contextual. In terms of our specific context, these domains can be represented as follows:

Domain	Descriptors	Examples from Interviews
Personal	Cognitive and Emotional factors Perceptions of capabilities Interpretation of actions Impact of prior experience Management of competing identities	“the scholarship of teaching and learning is the way I live, how much I care about my students and how much I care about improving practices for my students.”
Relational	Connection and Interconnection with others Sense of Belonging Comparison to others Perceptions of others	“I hadn’t appreciated that my colleagues were not as excited about understanding the teaching methods that would be useful to enhancing learning practices.”
Contextual	Curricular content Work environment	“I think in many disciplines you would have trouble getting tenured if you only did the scholarship of teaching and learning”

As the interview participants described their academic identities in terms of SoTL, these three domains were so closely intertwined that multiple codes were often appropriate. In many of the interviews, the idea of SoTL had the potential to disrupt the contextual, relational and/or personal domains. Such disruption could be positive or negative for the individual. Areas of disruption included conflicting valuations of SoTL.

The Value of SoTL

Many of the interviewees described what can be identified as conflicts between the personal, relational and contextual domains in terms of the value of SoTL. Most attributed a high value to SoTL activities; however, they described conflicts in relational and contextual domains where SoTL was not valued as highly. One interviewee, working in the area of teacher education in the UK, was unfamiliar with the term and acronym; it was not part of his institutional or disciplinary context. When the term was reframed as “teaching and learning improvement,” his responses were consistent with the other interviewees. All described their involvement with SoTL in positive, action-oriented terms. They said things like:

“For me personally it was a paradigm shift. All the emotions that come with that i.e. the joys of teaching, the emotions, the frustrations - all of that just tended to be the focus of the scholarship and teaching and learning work that I was engaged with at that time. And what I learnt is that the way that I teach is not always about me; it’s about my students and the way that they learn. So the scholarship of teaching and learning for me is how I

embody loving the work that I do.”

Participating in SoTL profoundly changed the way this participant thinks about education, a sentiment other SoTL practitioners have shared (West 2013; Goel, 2012). This paradigm shift involves affect in both the personal and relational domains. Many of our participants talked about the value of SoTL in affective terms. One participant speculated that valuing SoTL might be a threshold in itself that is difficult to cross. Another participant talked about the bottlenecks she felt as a SoTL novice--the anxiety of becoming a scholar in another field. One participant described himself as suffering from imposter syndrome. However, they all valued SoTL even with these emotional costs.

They sometimes felt troubled by other people’s valuation of SoTL as expressed in grant dollars and publication reputation. For example, one participant described SoTL as “a form of action research. . . We are doing this research not only to find out what is happening and why it is happening, but to change what is happening.” In this participant’s institution, however, SoTL publication counts as teaching, not as research, as “bringing outside dollars . . . is what matters.” This concern with grant money showed up multiple times in the interviews as participants described the struggles to fund this sort of research. Perhaps this is why one participant suggested reframing the discussion as “best practices for teaching and learning within the discipline as opposed to simply thinking about it as the scholarship of teaching and learning which at times may become an alienated term.” SoTL may be seen as alienating in a competitive environment with limited resources for research and scholarship.

Participants did not for the most part subscribe to this dichotomy between SoTL and the discipline. Some participants described their disciplines impacting their SoTL work. As one participant observed, “There is no question that we are educated in a way to perform research within our own areas of study.” Others described SoTL as changing their understanding of their disciplines:

“what I think is important about my disciplinary research has changed. And SoTL has really led me to the question of the valuation of different kinds of scholarship within the academy . . . it has shifted my activity away from interest in monographs, for example, which I think are a self-indulgence that we have sort of allowed ourselves and that we talk to each other . . . and I also think it has sort of freed me up to think about my disciplinary work differently.”

This participant went on to identify the larger questions animating her SoTL work, her disciplinary scholarship, and her classroom practices. SoTL allowed participants to learn more about their disciplines, ask questions about the value of their disciplinary work, and challenge assumptions about the norms of the academy.

The discipline remained important to most, though not all, participants even when the participant had moved on to other roles within the academy. As one respondent noted, SoTL is valued within the academy only if it has “truth” in relation to the discipline: “the central discourse is disciplinary.” This comment was made in relation to the practices of tenure and promotion committees, typically organized by discipline, but it also connects back

to the action-oriented nature of SoTL research. Another participant described the relationship between SoTL and the discipline in these terms: “SoTL is part of what I do in order to do what I do [to make] the classroom better but is not what I do and maybe this is the reason why SoTL is external to the discipline. SoTL is about learning . . . how to learn.” SoTL serves the discipline, but as in many “service areas” in the academy, practitioners may struggle with competing visions of education.

Competing Visions

These competing visions of education are played out at both the disciplinary and institutional levels and involve competing values. One participant described her realization that her colleagues,

“did not really focus on the scholarship of teaching and learning and simply taught. They were not too concerned with improving or enhancing their own practice in the classroom. Their task was to ensure that students completed a course of study.”

The participant is concerned with how to improve teaching practices to enhance student learning; the colleagues are concerned with completion of a course of study. Institutionally and within academic units, metrics like attrition rates and time to degree are important. The participant’s concern with enhancing practice in the classroom may rub against, even if it does not directly compete with, these other concerns. Another participant identified conflict between “what [she] was and where [she] was heading in terms of scholarship of teaching and learning” because of the different administrative demands: “I was involved a lot in administrative work and committee work which was not in the best interest for my students. It was in the best interest of the budget but not my students.” This tension between competing demands in higher education contexts is not unique to those involved with SoTL; indeed, almost everyone involved in higher education today recognizes a gap between the resources we have and the resources we need for quality education. However, SoTL, with its focus on student learning, may make the gap more visible.

Perhaps these competing visions of education are why SoTL can be officially valued, but marginalized. For example, one participant claimed that “SoTL was successful 20-30 years ago, but does not carry weight in terms of tenure and promotion;” another participant described SoTL as,

“Mostly failure. I don’t think that it is as widely recognized in the academic community as it should be. I think that it is . . . that scholarship of teaching and learning is reluctantly accepted by some. I think that institutionally is something everybody agrees with and nobody bothers about.”

SoTL occupies a liminal space within the academy, both officially endorsed and dismissed.

SoTL as Prism

What then of the individual who is heavily invested in the liminal space of SoTL? Participants described how participation in SoTL caused paradigm shifts, but the academy and the disciplines have not shifted along with them. In these circumstances, SoTL may

serve as a prism, allowing participants to see, not only aspects of student learning, but other aspects of their higher education contexts differently. This altered vision may be described in positive terms, as with the participant who described SoTL as “having a little Gem with different facets,” each facet illuminating a different aspect of practice. But for some participants, it can lead to troubling realizations: “the real dilemma that for many of us may be coming out of SoTL, and that is for years we have been told there are easy ways to help students learn and I don’t think that is true; there are no easy ways.” In higher education contexts that seek the latest, quickest, cheapest “solution,” SoTL may reveal our failures. Another participant talked about the importance of recognizing and trying to learn from failure: “maybe that is what the scholarship of teaching and learning is at this particular point in time.” It is unclear from the context if he was referring to the failure of higher education as illuminated by SoTL or the failure of SoTL as a movement to affect change or, perhaps, both. SoTL figured as a prism contains the possibility of seeing new elements of our teaching and learning contexts. However, a prism does not refract all light; some is reflected in a slightly altered trajectory from before. Savin-Baden (2012) suggests that when encountering a “troublesome learning space,” individuals manage disjunction in different ways including retreat, temporizing, avoidance, and engagement. She argues that “Troublesome identities are evident when challenges to personal beliefs about learning have occurred and have then promoted some kind of personal shift” (167). SoTL does not necessarily change our personal, relational or contextual domains; it might change our perceptions of these domains.

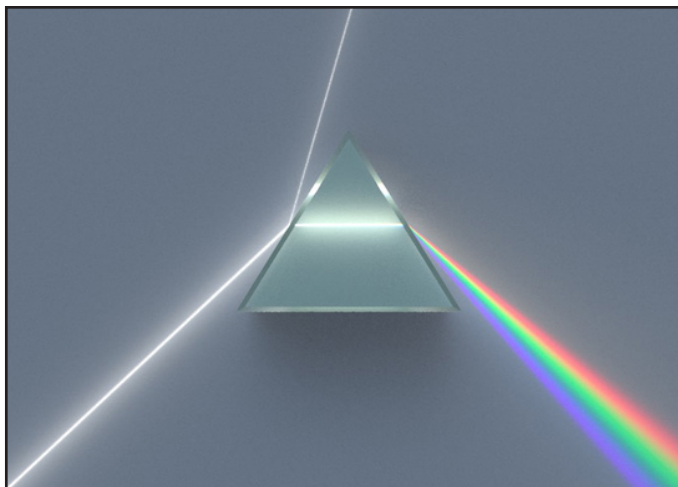


Figure 1: Dispersive Prism Illustration by Spigget.jpg, modified by Ceipheden

One limitation of this study is that our participants, for the most part, self-identified as SoTL practitioners. We do not know whether those who don’t identify as SoTL practitioners value SoTL. Are they even aware of it? If they are aware, do they find SoTL troublesome? Would they be inhibited by the label? Does the prism obscure? Further studies could take up these questions particularly in higher educational contexts outside of North America.

CONCLUSION

This study examined personal, relational, and contextual domains of SoTL practitioners to consider SoTL as troublesome knowledge.

Participants valued SoTL cognitively and affectively; however, their positive valuation of SoTL was troubled by several factors in relational and contextual domains. They identified competing visions of education both in terms of disciplinary practices and institutional demands. We suggest that SoTL may act as a prism, making already existing contradictions in higher education more visible. SoTL may indeed have the power to “make knowledge visible,” to echo a phrase familiar to many SoTL practitioners, but that knowledge may be troublesome. Recognizing dynamic domains may provide SoTL practitioners with language they can use to frame their own troublesome encounters with competing values in higher education contexts.

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Appendix One: Survey on SoTL

The link to an online survey was distributed through a variety of list-servs. The survey itself was administered through TooFAST, free software housed on a Canadian server: www.toofast.ca. We provided the following preamble and questions. For each open-ended question, participants could use an unlimited number of characters. Some answered briefly; some described their experience at length.

Dear Colleague,

Thank you for your co-operation and willingness to complete this survey. The aim of the survey is to gather information on academic experiences around the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), including challenges, opportunities, and identity. The information gathered will be used to consider knowledge and knowing within a SoTL framework. The majority of questions require short answers and explanations. In any dissemination, we will ensure that you cannot be identified by the information provided.

Please answer the questions as honestly and reflectively as possible. All questions have been reviewed and approved by the Mount Royal Human Research Ethics Board and the University of East London Research Ethics Committee.

Gender:

Higher Education Institution/ Country:

Academic Title:

Academic Discipline:

Principal Research Area/s:

In the past two years, have you

Attended any SoTL-specific conferences	Y	N
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Presented your work at any SoTL-specific conferences	Y	N
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Do you intend to attend any SoTL-specific events or conferences in the future?	Y	N
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Could you describe your academic identity by emphasizing your main areas of work and recognition?

What is your understanding of SoTL?

Do you consider your work to be SoTL focused?

What is the relationship between your academic and SoTL identities? Are there distinct differences?

Are there any tensions between your discipline and SoTL research activity?

Does your institution support SoTL development?

We then asked whether the individual would be interested in participating in a short interview (30-45 minutes) to further discuss the issues identified.