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# Asking Questions that Matter ... Asking Questions of Value

## Abstract

**Excerpt:** When I first became involved formally in scholarship of teaching and learning, it was the result of frustration and surprise tempered by high expectations and hope. I was teaching in a school of liberal studies that used program portfolios as an intellectual organizing feature and culminating assessment (self and otherwise). Students were to use this portfolio (physical, not online) to collect and reflect on work they accomplished during their time in the program. But in teaching the senior synthesis course, wherein students were to “go meta” with the portfolio and reflect on their entire undergraduate experience, I learned that virtually all of them treated the portfolio not as...

## Keywords

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## Asking Questions that Matter ... Asking Questions of Value<sup>1</sup>

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When I first became involved formally in scholarship of teaching and learning, it was the result of frustration and surprise tempered by high expectations and hope. I was teaching in a school of liberal studies that used program portfolios as an intellectual organizing feature and culminating assessment (self and otherwise). Students were to use this portfolio (physical, not online) to collect and reflect on work they accomplished during their time in the program. But in teaching the senior synthesis course, wherein students were to “go meta” with the portfolio and reflect on their entire undergraduate experience, I learned that virtually all of them treated the portfolio not as an ongoing tool for integration and intentionality but as an artifact repository. Furthermore, most of them bought their red binder at the beginning of the program and then never looked at it again until the end, with some even putting off purchase until the capstone Senior Synthesis course. Now, if this were just a binder it wouldn’t matter; but inside were rubrics, worksheets, definitional texts, opportunities for reflection, scaffolding of various kinds designed to help students navigate their journeys. Here began my interest in trying to understand a) why students did not make better use of this pedagogical tool, b) what would make the portfolio more useful to them, and c) how students could become more engaged with the portfolio process so as to make it about intentionality and empowerment rather than collection and assessment.

I mention this not because my experience is particularly unique or exemplary. I mention it because it demonstrates the multiple levels of engagement, the levels of research questions that sometimes appear together or in tandem but often in sequence during the career of a scholar. Put another way, my first interest in investigating program portfolio use was pedagogical (and also naïve and idiosyncratic)—I wanted to understand and improve student learning. My second interest was programmatic, contextual (just as naïve, if altruistic)—I wanted learning to be valuable to students and to demonstrate value within the program. My third interest was social, transformative, philosophical (clearly idealistic)—I wanted that learning to be deep and to influence my students’ approach to “doing college” and to lifelong learning from an intentional, integrative perspective. I came to these realizations later. At the time I was just trying to be a good teacher, a scholarly teacher, and a scholar of teaching and learning. It would have been useful if I could have framed these levels of engagement to better understand the wherefores of my inquiry. For much of our work in scholarship of teaching and learning is about access, how teachers begin investigating student learning in their own classrooms. But for some, it is helpful to think about the levels at which that access can occur and to realize that the research questions we ask can and should always be about questions that matter, questions of value—to us and to our context and to our larger community.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay began as two presentations: “Asking Questions of Value” (Vancouver Island Educational Developers Alliance SoTL Institute at Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo BC, 05/08/09) and “Asking Questions that Matter” (Eastern Michigan University SoTL Institute, Ypsilanti MI, 05/19/09).

## Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Backstory

For me, scholarship of teaching and learning is always a practice that seeks to understand student learning for the purposes of improving that learning beyond the local; as such it is student-centric (with “student” variously defined) and influential outside a single course context. It can be accomplished by any teacher, for any learner, in any venue, and for any constituency. Thus, it requires no special disciplinary training (although it often draws on a scholars’ own field), can focus on traditional or nontraditional students as well as on particular subsets and groups; , should be available to scholars teaching in any setting (seminars, lectures, labs, libraries, online), and contributes to knowledge building regardless of institutional type (college, institute, university, adult or lifelong learning programs). Scholarship of teaching and learning builds on multiple traditions, disciplines, methods, and requires dissemination that often occurs through both traditional and non-traditional means (publication, conference presentation, websites, workshops).

The heart of scholarship of teaching and learning is a cycle of inquiry that includes observation, investigation, examination, application, and subsequent observation. We begin with **observation**, what we see in our own course, what I call learners caught in the act of learning. That observation leads to a question about student learning and avenues for investigation. **Investigation** of learning-in-the-moment involves using appropriate research tools for data collection and review, for analysis and interpretation, for framing as evidence and for making a claim. This leads ultimately to some **examination** of process and product that validates the inquiry by learned peers—my view of this assessment follows Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff (1997). Once examined, the work is made public and available to others for **application** of insights and conclusions. This will in turn create second generation observations in new contexts, which lead to further investigations of student learning as the cycle of inquiry continues (for more see Gale 2007).

## Questions that Address Our Pedagogy

Although every aspect of this cycle is important, the research question developed out of the observation is what really drives investigation (in the same way that evidence presented as a result of data collection and analysis drives examination and application), and it is the research question that is the focus of this essay. In part this is because during my years of working with faculty and graduate students engaged in scholarship of teaching and learning I have found that constructing good questions is key to effective research, and examining the research question in terms of what really matters (to us, our colleagues, our institution, our world-view) can often be the key to persistence during the dark nights that always come with scholarly inquiry. As I used to tell my graduate students: Start with something that matters to you and make it matter to us. This is usually where scholars of teaching and learning begin, with questions that matter to our pedagogy.

Sometimes questions are purely informative, the “what is” category (described in Hutchings’ *Opening Lines*, p. 4) that seeks to throw light into or to open “the black box of student learning.” One such question might be, “what is happening when entrepreneurship students work collaboratively online to produce a product and a pitch?” The observation prompting this question is that something about online collaboration seems to contribute to learning, and through an examination of postings, products, interviews and focus groups the

researcher might understand the impact of online collaboration within his class (Bruton 2009). Similarly, “what works to help education students see assessment as instructive and useful for subsequent learning?” is a question that begins with an observation, albeit one less than positive. The teacher realized that most students view assessment as summative rather than formative and wanted to know whether different kinds of assessment (peer, instructor, self) produced different levels of engagement and improvement (Vaughan 2009). Finally, “what if international nursing students are given the chance to work with alumni mentors during their first semester?” is a question that creates a “vision of the possible” out of the observation that most international nursing students felt disconnected from their own future and might benefit from direct connection to recent graduates (Rai 2009).

What characterizes these questions, and most if not all questions of scholarship of teaching and learning, is their focus on student learning and the pedagogical implications of understanding more fully what is happening in the classroom. Each question connects a particular pedagogical concern (online collaboration, formative assessment, supportive mentorship) to a specific observation of student learning (improved collaboration, absent application, affective barriers). Each also stands as the manifestation of individual questions that “matter” to ourselves as teachers and scholars, to our students as learners, to our intended audience as learners of a different kind, and to our colleagues as teachers and potential scholars à la the cycle of inquiry. And each question at the heart of teaching and learning scholarship is one that addresses what we value in the classroom, from collaboration to consideration to connection and beyond.

### **Questions that Address Our Contexts**

Also striking about these examples is the way their implications exceed the boundaries of individual courses; each responds to a specific observation, but the issues raised are similar to those found elsewhere. As such, each could be seen as more than a question of value to a single instructor, and all could speak to the issues of other constituencies. I think of these kinds of questions in terms of a scholarship of shared concerns, operating not only at the course level but within an arena of value, addressing specific contexts.

Questions that address our contexts are in some sense more intentional than others, working with multiple agendas. All of them address a pedagogical need or desire, but they also move with intention toward greater influence and impact. Sometimes these questions seize on important and timely issues in common or engage in research particularly relevant to specific audiences. Another way of thinking about these questions is that they “push the right buttons” for a chosen and considered temporal and spatial environment; tapping into a local value system or into the needs of a changing landscape, and addressing the things that matter to our students, colleagues, institutions and the entire educational enterprise. What then are the categories of value that address our contexts, or rather, within what universes can scholarship of teaching and learning have the most to say?

Because we always talk about systematic scholarly inquiry into student learning from a field-specific position (when I investigate student learning in a theatre class it is a disciplinary as well as a pedagogical inquiry), the first area of impact is often disciplinary or professional. Thus, we can and sometimes should choose to investigate questions about student learning that bear on the way our field is taught, learned, understood, and changed. Often this kind of approach is second nature to scholars; we live within a disciplinary/

professional environment and our questions are always of a disciplinary/professional nature. But being intentional about those questions can help create a wider sphere of influence from the outset. Take for example Miller-Young's research question, "what is the process that engineering students go through when visualizing a two-dimensional (2D) drawing in three dimensions (3D)?" (2009). This question came from an instructor's observation of student difficulties in a first-year engineering course, but it has important implication for all engineering programs because the skill of 2D-to-3D visualization is vital to the success of all engineering students (and architects, theatre designers, visual artists). Likewise, when a teacher asks, "what kinds of online discussion board questions work to deepen student understanding of the issues and values of journalism?" (MacDonald 2009), he is engaging in an individual inquiry that speaks to the needs and goals of a discipline (as well as to a transdisciplinary audience invested in online discussion). In some sense the disciplinary/professional value of research questions may seem like a given. But there is a difference between choosing a question that happens to have field-specific implications and being intentional about addressing those implications. In the examples above, both instructors were well aware of the professional and disciplinary contexts and chose their questions with impact in mind.

Another category for intentional investigation, and one that we should perhaps be thinking about more actively, is the programmatic, departmental, institutional impact question. There are innumerable opportunities for inquiry within our college/university context, and often these are the kinds of investigations that garner the most visible and most vocal support from colleagues and administrators. "What are first-year writing students' meta-cognitive reading strategies, conscious and unconscious?" (Manarin 2009) is a question that comes from an English instructor, and as such might be parsed as disciplinary inquiry; but it is also a programmatic question for composition, which is certainly interested in helping students succeed in their reading strategies. Likewise, "what works to cultivate integrative and intentional learning in general education courses?" (Carey 2009) is a question being applied to a specific course but which has significant implications for all of GE.

Institution-level questions are often less obvious but can be more important. At Douglas College in New Westminster, British Columbia, Canada, there is something called the "Douglas Signature," which indicates institutional identity within a competitive Vancouver-metropolitan-area market. The signature sets Douglas apart, but inquiry into how the signature influences student learning (just beginning) would go a long way towards making it real for prospective students. Similarly, Royal Roads University (RRU) in Victoria, British Columbia, is dedicated to serving nontraditional students in a blended learning environment; as such, its faculty are studying student learning specific to that context, which will speak to future growth and distinction. Areas of difference and distinction are often ripe for teaching and learning scholarship, as they speak to institutional values and the character of the learning environment.

Other opportunities for inquiry can be found in institutional or departmental peer-status and identity aspirations. I am currently working with Mount Royal College in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, to raise the level of engagement in scholarship of teaching and learning. Mount Royal is on the cusp of becoming a university, with all of the complications and considerations that implies (in Canada, colleges generally are two-year institutions and universities are degree-granting institutions). Thus, some of the questions being considered at Mount Royal are aspirational, building knowledge around changes in student learning within new instructional contexts. Likewise, programs moving into degree-granting status (nursing, education, geology) are trying to gain understanding of those changes, while

programs remaining in the two-year category are seeking to understand the student learning that occurs prior to transfer.

There is also needs-based inquiry, which operates within a particular context from a perceived deficit stance: What areas of curricular weakness must be improved, what challenges facing students must be addressed? One example of this can be found at RRU, where the commitment to supporting nontraditional students often includes a challenge to understand and respond to prior learning (many of their students come with a wealth of real-world experience to be factored into their academic trajectory). So asking what works best to tap into prior learning becomes a distinctly needs-based question that can only benefit students, faculty, and staff. Finally, some of the shared context questions are unique, often opportunistic (addressing new circumstances such as a financial gift connected to particular learning outcomes), or idiosyncratic (such as those at single-gender institutions or linked to a particular event like the Nobel Lecture series at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota, USA), or speak to extraordinary and once-in-a-lifetime occurrences (the way students respond to a first-time opportunity to vote or the creation of a new program).

But there are noncurricular stakeholders and collaborators who can inform a scholarship of shared contexts. Disciplinary societies have been involved in the promotion and support of scholarship of teaching and learning for many years and are important partners when considering what questions are most pressing, or pertinent to, or absent from the discourse within any particular field. Those involved in institutional research have an immense knowledge base about students and their perceptions—triangulation of their data sets with individual or shared inquiry projects can only lead to deeper understanding. Similarly, working with the office of alumni affairs could open intriguing links between postgraduate reflections and current students' learning experiences. Student associations are particularly committed to improving learning and especially well placed to inform research that addresses concerns and celebrates strengths. This connection is also important when considering working with students as research collaborators, which is another excellent way to identify and address questions that matter. Finally, there are funding agencies and foundations that have particular agendas with regard to student learning, often without the kind of on-the-ground data they would like to have. And while it may seem at first a rather mercenary approach, funders often have a clearer sense of the local, regional, national, and international trends and trajectories than those of us who devote our time to teaching and improving our own classes.

All of these examples and categories present opportunities for collaboration and cooperation within an institutional setting. First of course, when we begin talking about levels of influence beyond the individual course, we are opening the door to scholar/scholar collaboration—two or more individuals working on the same question in similar contexts will generate exponentially more powerful results. And when institutions or units embark on a collective inquiry, the impact cannot help but be significant (Gale 2008). Plus, all of this speaks to the collective nature of scholarship and to the application-centric goals of scholarship of teaching and learning. Yes, we all want to investigate questions that matter to us as teachers, we all want to shed light on those pedagogical problems and strategies of most interest, the ones that hold for us the most value. But we also want our work to have impact in contexts within and beyond our academic milieu, and to that end we must consider carefully whether our interests are ours alone. Usually the answer is no. Therefore, it is a very small step toward the scholarship of shared contexts that I am suggesting. Indeed, because most of us are also scholars of discovery and application and

integration (Boyer 1990), we understand that all research serves more than one master, and that being aware of multifaceted implication profiles is an important part of what we do. This is especially true when we consider larger questions that address more than pedagogy, more than context—questions that speak to the values we hold most important in our lives as citizens, community members, and human beings.

### Questions that Address Our Values

One of the most important aspects of my own training as a Carnegie Scholar was participation in the 2000 cohort. I worked with historians, lawyers, theatre practitioners, sociologists, interdisciplinarians, and nursing professionals. But what really mattered was that many in our cohort had a particular interest in and commitment to issues of justice, equity, and civic values. Indeed, I later learned that ours had been nicknamed the “social justice cohort” because we spent so much time discussing, debating, and sharing resources around transformative pedagogy and issues of oppression (Freire 2000). This is not surprising given the nature of scholarship of teaching and learning, its commitment to improving student experience. But what is surprising is that when we think about the questions that most matter to us as teachers and the questions that address our core values as human beings, all too often these values are absent from the questions we ask as researchers. But if questions of shared context matter as much as I am suggesting, surely questions of shared values matter even more.

As teachers and scholars, we have an amazing opportunity to shed light on those aspects of academe that we consider most significant, and to that end I want to put in a word for questions that address the needs and aspirations of our communities, writ large. There is a place in teaching and learning scholarship for questions about how students learn empathy and tolerance. There is a need for investigation into how students learn to value equity and social justice. Already there are many faculty committed to civic and political engagement, not to mention public responsibilities of citizenship and social participation, this is a short step away from teaching and learning activism, empowerment, and cosmopolitanism.

Questions that fall into these categories include some asked by Carnegie Scholars in the CASTL Program during their residency year: What is the impact of a social justice action project on students’ persistence in ongoing community work? What is the learning benefit for law students of working with low-income community-based groups? What works to advance the development of students’ ethical understanding and to foster lifelong moral reasoning skills? What works to increase students’ sense of global consciousness and world awareness, currently and historically? What if students were asked to use historical understanding as a way of informing and performing effective political action? What if students learned biochemistry through social issues such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis, influenza, and malnutrition (Carnegie 2009)? None of these questions is “rocket science” and many have probably occurred to us in one form or another. But what makes them worth considering here is that they are being asked as part of a systematic scholarly investigation into student learning that speaks to more than pedagogy, to more than context. These questions get at the very heart of our values and at the values we want students to understand on a deep, personal level.

Admittedly, there is an issue here. Just as the scholarship of shared context mentioned above could seem to some as a mercenary activity, engaging in scholarship addressing questions of values could be seen as a political act. My only answer to that is, I certainly



hope so. Because from my own perspective, education should always be a political act, in that it should always speak to the way people make decisions, form opinions, and serve for the good of the community. My pedagogical motto is “always political, never partisan.” These questions, and the uncounted others that could and should be asked in order to shed light on the things that matter most to us and to our students, have the potential to increase our knowledge, to expand our understanding, and to make change in areas that matter most. If those who engage in scholarship of teaching and learning are willing to take the time and effort necessary to perform our inquiry thoughtfully and to accept the responsibility for investigation, examination, and application, then surely we might also want to tackle questions that matter pedagogically, contextually, and politically. Or to put it another way, if teaching really is community property (I believe it is), then surely scholarship of teaching and learning should speak to the values of that community (Shulman 2004).

### Take-Away

I think of this progression from our own questions to our community’s questions as a series of steps, levels of teaching and learning scholarship. Most scholars (and most introductions to scholarship of teaching and learning) begin on level one, asking what we (teachers) want to know about student learning to better understand what’s happening in our classrooms. Some of us then move to level two, asking what we (collectively) need to know about student learning in order to contribute more fully to our disciplines, programs, departments, institutions. Some continue to level three, asking what we (citizens) think our community should know about student learning to inform understanding of how to teach to and learn from issues that impact our lives in the present and shape our aspirations for the future.

- Level One Scholarship asks questions about student learning focused on pedagogical observations, what we value and need to understand as teachers and as scholars.
- Level Two Scholarship asks questions about student learning that inform and support broader institutional agendas, speaking to shared questions of value and what we need to understand as members of an academic community.
- Level Three Scholarship asks 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.

I am not saying that these levels are necessarily sequential; most of the above questions are points of access for first-time scholars. Instead, what I am suggesting is that we need to consider all levels of scholarship when undertaking inquiry, for in many cases a single question can be a “servant of two masters” (apologies to Goldoni). Most recently I have been involved in training first-time scholars through the Mount Royal Teaching and Learning Scholars Program, and in that context I have started with pedagogical questions in an effort to help teachers understand what it means to accomplish scholarship of teaching and learning. But I have come to realize that moving on to other levels, other areas of impact, other issues of value-making can occur at very early stages; for some, beginning on level three is the most fruitful and practical approach. What matters most is that we intentionally ask the questions that matter, the questions of value, not simply adopt those questions when they appear or become framed in a larger discourse. And that is, I think, the real opportunity for scholarship of teaching and learning: To ask questions that inform and

improve our pedagogy, our academic context, and above all our communities, lives, and futures.

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