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Transformative Education in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: An Analysis of SoTL Literature

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Introduction

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), though in its youth, is transforming the academy. Will the transformation of the academy promised by SoTL shift priorities from research in the disciplines to research in pedagogy? Or will SoTL pursue more in depth transformation of the conception of teaching and learning? SoTL reconceptualizes teaching and learning by promoting the *commons,* or conceptual spaces for exchange of ideas and community building among education stakeholders (Huber & Hutchings, 2005, p. 1). The commons influences our identities as knowers and actors engaged in scholarship for the purposes of transformation and growth on local and global scales. Thus, the purpose of SoTL, as we see it, is to develop spaces or commons to support, on multiple levels, those engaged in teaching and learning.

Although SoTL is often localized to those engaged in specific communities, its reach is global. "But if teaching and learning are to advance, the commons must be a place where diverse instances and types of work must be connected" (Huber & Hutchings, 2005, p. 52). When we connect individual work and work across commons, we get a clearer picture of SoTL in practice and the degree to which its basic tenets are upheld. As a practice, SoTL has tremendous potential to serve those least served by previous curriculum reform movements which tended to emphasize technical or methodological change rather than

addressing the larger community and environment in which teaching and learning take place. The localized practice of SoTL within a commons supports a global understanding of the interconnections between teaching and learning across multiple contexts.

SoTL seeks a transformation in the academy through its threefold agenda: 1) recognizing teaching as inquiry relevant to research; 2) recognizing the act of teaching as a public rather than private endeavor, and thus related to the formation of community or commons; and 3) recognizing teaching as a scholarly endeavor, and thus subject to peer review and evaluation (McKinney, 2007; Huber & Hutchings, 2005; Huber & Morreale, 2002; Shulman, 2002; Bender and Gray, 1999; and Bass, 1999). We see this transformative aspect of SoTL as potentially manifesting in two significant ways: 1) turning teaching into scholarship to be used for tenure and promotion in order to increase the emphasis and importance of pedagogy throughout the university community; and 2) establishing commons whereby learning communities grow in their understanding of one another and our roles in society in order to transform those roles. Of these two, our focus in this research specifically addressed the second of these manifestations of transformation. Indeed, we believe that the expression of threefold agenda of SoTL as manifested through establishment of the commons holds potential to go beyond technical machinations of our pedagogical practices. We believe that the commons can move us into a reconceptualization of teaching and learning as a shared endeavor that transforms not only teaching and learning but our relationship of one to another and of ourselves to our world.

Leaders in SoTL highlight the movement as promoting work that is ethical, context responsive, and carries moral and "pedagogical" imperatives (Huber and Hutchings, 2005; Hutchings, 2002; Shulman, 2002; and Huber and Morreale, 2002). Lee Shulman (2002), former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, makes it clear that those engaged in the scholarship of teaching and learning must be responsive to the "pedagogical imperative" which includes "the obligation to inquire into the consequences of one's work with students" (p. vii). Further, Shulman refers to SoTL as not only supporting a particular type of research, but as a "concept of moral action aimed at cultural change" (p. vii). We are, as Shulman notes, also ethically responsible for the broader applications and ramifications of our scholarship. Transformative education carries a mandate that education is a vehicle for social change and a catalyst for individual and collective responsibility for social justice. Thus, education has an imperative to reconstruct and reinvent a more equitable social order (Astuto et. al, 1994, p. 23).

Our purpose is to explore whether the scholarship of teaching and learning, as represented in literature associated with SoTL, is being utilized for transformative or transgressive (hooks, 1994) educational practices. Does SoTL address the sociopolitical realities of education that are often overlooked in school reform movements? What does a review of literature identified as SoTL reveal about the utilization of the commons and the transformative practice of SoTL? Is SoTL playing its role in promoting education that is responsive to the sociopolitical climates in which teaching and learning occur?

Methods

With these questions in mind, we conducted a review of literature on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning to gauge whether the commons is being utilized to forward a transformative teaching agenda. We created a spreadsheet to document the author, title, date, subject (e.g., education, theater, business) of the piece, the context (e.g., university, community college), and place of origin (e.g., U.S., UK, Australia, etc.) of each piece for

analysis. Additionally, we took field notes (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) on each article, conference presentation and book describing the contribution of each piece to the field of SoTL, and used a set of 3 questions (listed below) to determine whether the scholarship reviewed was being responsive or reflected a commitment to a socially transformative agenda.

We reviewed 323 works identified explicitly as SoTL dating from 1999 to 2008. Of these, 252 were journal articles, 8 were books and 63 were conference proposals. The international perspective of SoTL was reflected in our review. Several articles referenced research conducted in the UK and Australia. Several academic disciplines were represented: ranging from hard sciences (technology, mathematics, biology, and nursing) to social sciences (sociology, psychology) to humanities (history, communication, writing, theater) to education (higher education and teacher education). Several articles were inter-disciplinary in nature.

We reviewed every article published in all volumes of the three leading SoTL journals in the United States: *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (IJ-SoTL), *Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (JoSoTL), and *MountainRise: An Electronic Journal Dedicated to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. We also reviewed an additional 80 articles, drawn from more than 20 journals, identified as SoTL in the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC). These journals included: *Communication Education, Social Forces, Journal of Teacher Education, Journal of General Education,* and the *Journal of College Science Teaching*). We believe these journal articles provide a good overview of the contemporary conversation in SoTL. To further inform our knowledge of the field we reviewed 8 books to represent more solidified ideas in the field, and 63 conference proposals from the *SoTL Commons (2007)* inaugural SoTL conference, to get a sense of emerging ideas in the field relative to establishment of a commons toward supporting transformative teaching. We have examined the literature produced through SoTL in an effort to ascertain whether the commons is being utilized to support the transformative threefold agenda of SoTL. Specifically, we asked the following overlapping questions:

1. Does the scholarship acknowledge that identify effects experience (Moya & Hames-Garcia, 2000)?

2. Does the scholarship increase and support the process of conscientization (Friere, 1970/1998) and help people understand social ills (Atkinson, 2001)?

3. Does the scholarship help people address social ills (Atkinson, 2001) and/or show evidence of moving from conscientization and understanding to praxis (Friere, 1970/1998; hooks, 1994)?

We assigned yes or no categorization to these questions indicating whether the article engaged in transformative discussion. A yes to any of the three questions placed the article in the transformative category. Yes categorization included articles that acknowledge and/or utilize the sociopolitical realities of the educational landscape in their inquiry. These include articles that seek to facilitate the development of *conscientization* (Freire, 1970/1998), articles that support praxis (Freire,1970/1998; hooks, 1994; hooks, 2000) toward a more just social order, and articles that that generally take the view of or utilize teaching as a vehicle for social change (Astuto et.al, 1994). Such pieces contextualize and problematize educational inquiry within the social and political locations in which teaching and learning are set.

We believe that the organic and localized engagements in SoTL, combined with broader theoretical underpinnings, including those that acknowledge social inequality, generates conditions wherein the *commons* is utilized as a politicizing force within the teaching and learning environment. Our study presents an analysis of published documents revealing the spaces where this politicization is coming to be – where practitioners of SoTL may enact *conscientization* (Freire,1970/1998) leading toward transformative educational practice.

Findings and Discussion

Our review of the scholarship in the field of SoTL revealed that the majority of the articles delineate the parameters of SoTL, as should be expected from a new and emerging movement. The primary topics focus on the need of SoTL to transform expectations for tenure and promotion acknowledging the importance of scholarly research on teaching – especially in fields of sciences, arts and business. In addition to these, we found that people within "caring" fields such as nursing, teaching and continuing education are writing on action research in their classrooms. Fifteen of the documents explicitly address online teaching (inclusive of hybrid instruction). Unsurprisingly, most of the conversation in SoTL is happening in and about higher education.

Clearly, there is a transformation taking place in the field of higher education. Our research sought to ascertain the impact of this transformation on reconceptualizing teaching and learning as a process whereby learning communities grow in their understanding of one another and our roles in society.

Using the questions listed above, thirty-four (34) out of a total of 323 items reviewed received a rating of "yes," indicating that they utilized the commons as a transformative element. Within this group, we found a variety of ways in which SoTL is being used as a vehicle for transformative education.

In the books reviewed, three (Gayle, et al. 2006; Huber and Hutchings, 2005; Hutchings, 2002) of eight contained reference to sociopolitical dynamics and discussions of transformative agenda or practices. This discussion primarily took place in the context of ethical decision-making regarding research processes and SoTL in general. However, in these snapshots, such as Shulman's forward to Hutchings (2002), the social and ethical under girding of SoTL are evident.

We believe that SoTL, as a movement will provide a space for transformation toward social justice. The more recent journal publications show more attention to this topic than the early journal articles. Among the 26 journal articles positively associated with the discourse of critical transformation in SoTL, the majority of these were published between 2006-2008 (5 in 2008, 8 in 2007, 5 in 2006; 17 total in 2006-2008). Meanwhile the earlier articles reveal a total of only 9 articles positively associated with transformative education published 2000-2005. From 2006 until 2008, there seems to be an emerging discourse — representing a conversation of critical transformation. Evidence of a mandate for this discourse was set early in the movement and echoed by leaders in SoTL (Shulman, 2002 and Huber and Morreale, 2002).

The articles that we identified as transformative came from various fields including, Theatre, Writing and Linguistics, Sociology and Teacher Education. Some of the articles reflected collaboration across fields or integration of elements from different areas of study. The pieces were grounded in a variety of theoretical frameworks, including; postmodern

research, cognitive psychology, gender studies, and a range of socio-cultural theories supporting Gerhard and Mayer–Smith's (2008) call for those approaching the scholarship of teaching and learning to work from or utilize different theoretical orientations. Depending on perspectives taken different questions are asked about teaching and learning and different kinds of inquiry result. Thus, as Gerhard and Mayer-Smith state, "Let us be bold and explicit about the theories we draw from and why, and let us be open to the questions that can emerge when we consciously cast a wider net in framing our research through new and different theories" (2008, p. 11). The variety of forms and subject matter of the works support an agenda for social justice that is strengthened by diversity. Subject matter ranged from preservice teachers' use of aesthetic representations to help them envision philosophies of education that possibly hold more transformative potential than the philosophies they state by rote (McDermott, 2008) to challenging the SoTL movement to pursue a more transformative agenda (Kreber, 2006 and Atkinson, 2001).

While the works identified as transformative varied in the degree to which they manifested a transformative agenda, they all highlight what we think are some mutually supporting tenets of theoretical orientations that lead to transformative education, and reflect attention to the three main questions we asked (p. 4).

The most basic potential for transformative education rests in the recognition that identity affects experiences (Moya and Hames Garcia, 2000). Experiences, in turn, influence the degree to which people benefit from institutions, including higher education. This recognition is evident when educators such as Ambers (2003) explore whether or not single-gender group exams would increase "active learning and level the playing field for women" (p. 2) in her large undergraduate/entry-level geology class. Her SoTL project includes elements that are responsive to literature that highlights women's underrepresentation in science (Sadker & Sadker, 1994).

Transformative education increases *conscientization* by helping individuals see themselves relative to larger social structures (Freire, 1970/1998). Thus, it involves problematizing people's location(s), and helping them see how they are simultaneously victims of the status quo and complicit with the status quo. An exemplar of this kind of consciousness-raising is offered by Biren (Ratnesh) and Gurin (2007) in their report on a multiuniversity engagement in an effort to move the discourse toward building a diverse community with shared investment in and collaboration for social justice. Through intergroup dialogue, the authors brought together students across identity groups for consciousness raising and promotion of social justice through community building and conflict engagement. Such a project explicitly supports a transformative education agenda. Biren (Ratnesh) and Gurin explain:

> The scholarship of teaching and learning of intergroup dialogues shows that involving students in intellectual and affective interactions with fellow classmates--voicing their convictions and trepidations, listening to each other's desires for connection and fears of betrayal, inquiring into how each of their experiences is influenced by the larger social realities, and knowing deeply that one's own sense of humanity is interconnected to how we are with each other –can contribute to democratic living just not politically but personally as well (2007, p. 43).

Reflection, a cornerstone of SoTL, is foundational for transformative education. However, reflection that supports a transformative agenda is more reflexive in nature and is often accompanied by critical pedagogy and actions that reflect the garnered understanding. Kreber calls for a move from traditional content and process reflections to *premise reflection*

- "questioning of presuppositions of what we believed to be true" (p. 94). Through premise reflection "our learning becomes emacipatory" (p. 94). As Kreber notes, reflection is an integral part of SoTL that must be responsive to broader social and cultural imperatives. We agree with Kreber that SoTL is poised to support this move from mere superficial reflections to more in-depth transformative and critical reflection leading to action. In other words, those pursuing SoTL within a transformative educational agenda engage in *praxis* – critical reflection and action (Freire, 1970/1998, hooks, 1994). For those of us who work in teacher education, critical pedagogy includes helping our students become engaged in praxis. Along this line, Calderwood et al. (2008) illustrate how a group of pre-service teachers participated in the authentic development of communities of practice, true commons. Through reflective collaboration and conversations with like minded peers who supported each other in their efforts, this group of students developed a sense of education for social justice through reflections and conversation in spaces set up by the instructor to facilitate that purpose. In this case, the search for social justice occurred with respect for the preservice teachers as autonomous members of the community of practice, allowing them time and space to interact with practitioners and theorists who are knowledgeable and passionate about practice in the context of social justice. "Teacher education programs that privilege collaboration, reflection, and critical pedagogy, and that connect these processes to the audacious notion that attention to social justice belongs in the curricula – manifest, implicit and hidden – in our schools, may be well able to kindle a profound sense of professional community among their candidates" (Calderwood, et. Al, 2008, p. 12). Kreber (2006) also addresses the role of critical reflection in moving SoTL toward a more transformative stance. SoTL should be concerned with "moral and civic purposes" (p. 88) of university teaching and not just narrowly defined best practices.

As reflected through our inquiry, the commons and SoTL in general can be utilized to reflect transformative education's commitment to better acknowledge and utilize the realities of the educational landscape in inquiry, facilitate the development of *conscientization*, and support *praxis* toward a more just social order. SoTL can therefore, help enact a fundamental shift in how we contextualize and problematize our educational inquiry and facilitate the advancement of a more equitable social agenda.

We would like to echo Atkinson (2001) in noting that SoTL has the potential to transform the academy in socially meaningful ways. She notes that SoTL is a much "larger enterprise that can transform the nature of American society toward our ideals of equality and justice" (p. 1227). She reminds us of that education has broader purposes including helping people understand and effectively address social ills (p. 1225). SoTL as a movement has tremendous potential to broaden its impact by making the remedying of social ills an explicit part of its agenda.

Conclusions

Our review of literature ascertained that transformative educational practices (hooks, 1994) do have a space in SoTL "a big tent, if you will under which a wide variety of work can thrive" (Huber & Hutchings, 2005, p. 4). The framing principles of SoTL would appear to even the most skeptical to reflect aspects of basic arguments put forward in critical and feminists spaces. As in critical and feminist theoretical underpinnings, the framing principles for SoTL state the need for work done in the context of SoTL to be responsive to educational landscape and to be responsible for the moral implications of teaching and learning. Work done in the context of SoTL should be responsive to changing demographics and national priorities, among other social justice concerns (Huber and Hutchings, 2005 and Huber and

Morreale, 2002). In other words, much of the foundational dialogue surrounding SoTL seems to echo a transformative or transgressive agenda (hooks, 1994). SoTL represents an opportunity to support transformative education in daily pedagogical practices and scholarly teaching.

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