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Keywords

SoTL, Model, Constructive alignment, Assessment

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Hype or Hope: Can the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Fulfill Its Promise?

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Abstract

Proponents of the scholarship of teaching and learning claim that it holds huge potential to improve teaching in higher education. The viability of this claim is assessed by examining epistemic and educational challenges to the assumptions that underlie prevailing models of SoTL. The assessment indicates that the assumptions are flawed and identifies significant questions about what has been achieved and how to move forward. An alternative model for the scholarship of teaching is proposed.

Keywords: SoTL, model, constructive alignment, assessment

Introduction

Ten years have passed since the publication of Hutchings and Shulman's influential article, "The Scholarship of Teaching: New Elaborations, New Developments" (1999). Hutchings and Shulman proposed that an attribute of the scholarship of teaching and learning is engagement in inquiry and investigation, primarily focused on student learning. The addition of this attribute reflects an important change in emphasis from Boyer's original formulation of a scholarship of teaching. During the ensuing decade, national and international journals, conferences and academic associations have been established to foster and disseminate the products of faculty research on teaching. Promotion of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) has become a movement in higher education.

The purpose of the present essay is to reflect critically on the significance of Hutchings and Shulman's (1999) emphasis on research for the success of SoTL. Proponents of SoTL research have high hopes for its potential impact on higher education. For example, the home website of the *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* proclaims that SoTL research is "a key way to improve teaching effectiveness, student learning outcomes, and the continuous transformation of academic cultures and communities." Similarly, the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning fosters SoTL research with the aims of supporting student learning, enhancing "the practice and profession of teaching" and increasing the recognition and rewards for engaging in teaching by positioning it as scholarly work. These are lofty goals. The question is whether they can be realized through SoTL research.

To date, it is easier to demonstrate increased SoTL research activity than to identify direct evidence of such transformative effects. Kreber (2005) questions whether SoTL research has yet engaged in significant, critical educational questions, and a survey by O'Meara (2006) suggests that conventional research priorities are a barrier to the recognition of SoTL in research-oriented institutions. Her findings are a reminder that the impact of SoTL is subject to structural and cultural factors. The present essay will examine the viability of claims for the potential impact of research-oriented SoTL through an analysis of the

assumption about how this impact will be achieved. The essay will start with a description of Boyer's (1990) original proposal for a scholarship of teaching, and the changes introduced by Hutchings and Shulman (1995). It will then discuss key challenges to the assumptions about the mechanism by which SoTL research will achieve its transformative effects and potential directions for the future.

Teaching as Scholarship

Boyer's (1990) proposal for a scholarship of teaching grew out of his concern that the ascendancy of research had eclipsed other important academic contributions to society. He argued that the term "scholarship" had become synonymous with "research": concomitantly other academic contributions (such as teaching) had become devalued. In *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*, Boyer reclaimed the term "scholarship" and reframed its meaning. His more inclusive conceptualization of scholarship encompassed discovery (i.e. research), integration, application and teaching of knowledge. Boyer's text suggests that he intended these four domains of scholarship to be valued equally and in their own right. For example, Boyer states his conviction that university missions "must be carefully redefined and the meaning of scholarship creatively reconsidered," (p.13), and that scholarship should be given "... a broader, more capacious meaning, one that brings legitimacy to the full scope of academic work" (p.16). Further, Boyer describes these domains of scholarship as "four separate, yet overlapping, functions" (p.16).

The distinctiveness of the scholarships of teaching and of research is reinforced in Boyer's (1990) comments on how these forms of scholarship might be assessed. Boyer argues that scholarship can be evaluated rigorously, even when it is represented in formats other than refereed journals and monographs. He suggests that textbooks, "popular writing" to disseminate complex ideas to non-specialist audiences, performance and artistic productions are legitimate formats for scholarship and amenable to peer evaluation. Similarly, teaching is a form of scholarship which can be evaluated using peer observation, descriptions of the theory used to inform teaching, discussion of products, procedures and self-assessments of teaching, and information about student perceptions. Peer reviewed publications about teaching are described as "yet another form" of possible peer review for the scholarship of teaching (p.38) – there is no suggestion that such publications are a necessary condition for scholarship in teaching.

The goal and underlying logic of Boyer's (1990) argument - that the domains of scholarship can be distinguished by their various goals and activities, and that they should be assessed accordingly – appears to be clear. Indeed, Hutchings and Shulman (1999) indicate that the framing of good teaching as "serious intellectual work" was "the powerful message most readers took from *Scholarship Reconsidered*."

Research-Oriented Scholarship

Hutchings and Shulman (1999) also referred to colleagues who declared that "scholarship of teaching" was an ambiguous term. These critics exploited the semantic possibilities arising from the novel conjunction of "teaching" and "scholarship." In particular, putative distinctions between excellent or expert teaching, scholarly teaching, and scholarship of teaching served as "red herrings" to divert attention from the inherent logic of Boyer's proposition. (Parallel distinctions applied to research, i.e. scholarly research and scholarship

of research, are more easily recognized as *non sequiturs*.) Nevertheless, Hutchings and Shulman yielded to the critics and added questioning and investigation (i.e. research on teaching and learning) to the attributes they had previously specified for the scholarship of teaching and learning (i.e. that the work could be subject to observation, peer review and adoption by others). They thereby introduced the paradoxical concept of SoTL as a domain of scholarship which is distinct from that of research, but which nevertheless requires research to be defined as a domain of scholarship.

The addition of the attribute of research represented a significant departure from Boyer's model of scholarship. It is difficult to reconcile with Boyer's approach, which was to rebalance the value assigned to the different kinds of academic contributions by evaluating each in terms of its own objectives and activities. Hutchings and Shulman (1999) justified the new requirement as the means to an end: the resulting research would improve the teaching of the individual who conducted the research, and also benefit the teaching (and learning) of others. In their inspirational words, "It is the mechanism through which the profession of teaching itself advances... the scholarship of teaching has the potential to serve all teachers--and students." Similar claims are made by SoTL leaders and institutions today, as illustrated by the examples at the beginning of this essay. The important question is whether a research-oriented model of SoTL has the capability to fulfill these expectations.

Challenges for Research-Oriented Models of SoTL

Closer examination of the claims described above reveals an underlying assumption: that the new understandings gained by individuals engaged in SoTL research can be used by others. This may well happen on some occasions, so initially the assumption appears reasonable. However, we do not necessarily act on new information or in response to rational arguments. Two key challenges must be overcome if SoTL research is to make a significant impact on teaching practices in higher education. These challenges are epistemic and educational, and are described below in more detail.

Epistemic Challenges

The epistemic challenges for SoTL are twofold. The first challenge arises from academics' expectations for standards of research evidence. The second challenge arises from the discontinuities between different kinds of knowledge.

Cross and Steadman (1996) described the important distinctions between formal educational research and the classroom research entailed in SoTL. While the quality and usefulness of formal educational research is a topic of recurrent debate, such research typically conforms to standard criteria for evaluating research quality. Conducting research in one's own classroom typically constrains the feasibility of research methods and designs, and so makes it difficult to fulfill these quality criteria. Cross and Steadman suggest that findings of such "unwarranted" investigations can only be regarded as "tentative hypotheses" for others, and argue that the classroom researcher is more likely to "build a base of knowledge about what works for them in their discipline with their students" than to produce knowledge that others can build on (p.12). Academics are unlikely to value knowledge that cannot be shared.

Weimar (2006) also recognized the challenges of classroom research. However, her proposal of differing standards for various categories of pedagogical research is unlikely to be received sympathetically by those academics who are already skeptical of the credibility

of research on teaching: it is easier to dismiss research than to apply varying standards. Some academics may even be skeptical of the possibility that anything useful could be learned from research to improve teaching, especially if they hold the “assumptions that devalue university teaching” previously identified by Weimar (1997).

Discontinuities or dissonance between prior beliefs and new evidence about teaching can also pose challenges for SoTL as a mechanism to influence other teachers. As an example, differences in conceptions of teaching (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999) can lead us to reject ideas which are perceived as relevant and useful by those with different conceptions of teaching. Ho (2000) demonstrated the importance of changing conceptions of teaching to achieve improvements in teaching.

In addition, there is a significant discontinuity between the kinds of explicit information and knowledge which typify reports of SoTL (or any other) research, and the implicit procedural knowledge which guides practices such as teaching. For example, Jarvis (1999) emphasizes the role of personal experience (“pragmatic knowledge”) and tacit knowledge in shaping practice. The enduring challenge of professional education, including teaching, is to bring these together effectively.

Educational Challenges

Current academic conventions are to disseminate research and new ideas in the form of text, in printed or electronic articles and books. Unfortunately, this is one of the least effective ways to influence behaviours such as teaching practices. Systematic reviews of the literature have compared the effectiveness of different methods of disseminating information for changing behaviour. Interactive approaches are consistently superior to educational materials (e.g. Reardon, Lavis and Gibson, 2006). Other literature on professional development indicates the importance of “situated learning” and of practicing new skills in the context in which they are to be used (for example, Sharpe, 2004): these are precluded when learning is based on textual information only.

Directions for the Future

Reappraising the Role of Research-Oriented SoTL

The epistemic and educational factors described above are inherent to models of SoTL which depend on research for legitimacy. They are likely to limit both the extent to which faculty engage in SoTL and how much others can benefit from SoTL research conducted by individuals.

Some of the educational challenges can be mitigated by attending to structural factors. For example, the research on professional and faculty development indicates the importance of social interaction for learning. One corollary is that supporting collaborative approaches to SoTL may be more beneficial than solitary engagement. A second corollary is that disseminating SoTL research through workshops and rich, interactive media will have more impact than conventional publication strategies. McKinney (2007) summarizes other common recommendations for structural support for SoTL research: these include increasing engagement in and support for SoTL, maintaining a broad definition, and improving the quality and relevance of the research. A limitation of these strategies is that they are only likely to affect faculty who are interested in learning through and from SoTL research. It is likely to be easier and more efficient to persuade (or require) uninterested or

unmotivated faculty to participate in other methods of development than to engage them with SoTL research.

It is much harder to overcome the epistemic challenges to the anticipated impact of SoTL research on teaching and its relative status within higher education. Huber and Hutchings (2005) emphasize the importance of providing faculty with sufficient time and support to conduct high quality research. Neither of these resources can help to overcome the constraints that typical teaching conditions impose on research design and methods. Lack of control conditions and sufficient participants to achieve statistical power are common problems in quantitative classroom research, while many qualitative methods are too intensive to implement while teaching. Cross and Steadman (1996) wisely advised against expecting classroom research to generate generalizable and cumulative contributions to our collective understanding. However, such research may sometimes be essential to build deeper and useful understandings of our own teaching and students.

Further, there are conflicting recommendations about the most appropriate kinds of investigation for SoTL. Advocates of classroom and practitioner research (such as Cross & Steadman, 1996; Jarvis, 1999) emphasize the advantages of the SoTL researchers' "insider" status for qualitative research, and the value of descriptive research that gives insight into learning processes and individual differences among students. In contrast, other writers stress the importance of evaluating and refining innovations in teaching, or the need for critical inquiry to identify hidden assumptions and counter inequities. It is time to take stock of the methods and questions used in SoTL research and to ask what kinds of research are being pursued, where this research is heading, and why.

In light of these concerns and limited resources, it is essential to think carefully and critically about what can be accomplished by promoting research-oriented models of SoTL. We can invest in improving the quality and reporting of SoTL research, but must recognize both the opportunity costs and the limitations of the return on these investments. We need to find out much more than we currently know about whether and how SoTL research might improve the teaching and learning of those involved, and whether and how it is useful for improving the teaching and learning of others. We need to know more about how best to prepare and support faculty who engage in it. And we need to be far more informed and explicit about how SoTL research can be integrated most effectively into an overall strategy for enhancing the quality and perceived value of teaching and learning in our institutions.

Resolving the Paradox of Research-Oriented Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

It seems ironic that some of the strongest advocates for SoTL research have come to realize that teaching which takes learning seriously must also be recognized as "substantive, intellectual work" (Huber and Hutchings, 2005, p.120). Huber and Hutchings also urge more extensive documentation of teaching and in more appropriate formats so that "colleagues can access and understand" the complexities of teaching (p.123); that intellectual credit for teaching efforts should be acknowledged; and that teaching should be rewarded in institutional policies and procedures. These recommendations are remarkably similar to those proposed by Boyer (1990).

The convergence between the two positions allows us to resolve the debate about the appropriate attributes and activities for a scholarship of teaching and learning. It is much more straightforward to argue that research on teaching and learning is a legitimate and important area of research in its own right than to justify such research as an attribute of a different form of scholarship. Research on teaching and learning can then be classified and

assessed according to the criteria used for other research. This was the case in medical education for many years (though the original clarity was somewhat diminished in the general confusion about the meaning of the scholarship of teaching).

The example of medical education can also inform strategies to support and advance similar research in other disciplinary contexts. Specialized centres for medical education have nurtured physicians as future researchers and enabled partnerships with researchers from education and other disciplines. These partnerships can result in cross-fertilization of ideas and methodologies and can generate new research questions, and new ways of understanding old research questions. Other significant innovations (such as the use of standardized patients for teaching and assessing clinical skills) have been enabled by substantial grants for educational innovation.

Once research on teaching and learning is accepted as a field of research, it is no longer necessary to claim it as an attribute of the scholarship of teaching. It then becomes much more straightforward to argue that learning-centred teaching is a legitimate and important academic activity which merits the accolade of scholarship in its own right.

Building a New Model of the Scholarship of Teaching

It is difficult to find models of the scholarship of teaching which focus explicitly on student learning. Trigwell and Shale's model of scholarship (2004) is unique in its focus on students. Perhaps in reaction to models that appear to focus almost entirely on demonstrations of underlying pedagogical knowledge or research on teaching, Trigwell and Shale's emphasis is on teaching as a practice and in action. They equate the scholarship of teaching with "pedagogic resonance," which they describe as

...the bridge between teaching knowledge and the student learning that results from that knowledge. It is pedagogic resonance that is constituted in the individual acts of teaching, and it is the effect of pedagogic resonance that is experienced by students.

Pedagogical resonance is not an easy concept to operationalize. Trigwell and Shale suggest that it can be identified as points of synergy in the experience of teacher and students. However, the procedure to make this identification appears cumbersome, and neither the criteria against which it would be assessed, nor how it could be used to inform future teaching, are clear from their description.

The model proposed here provides an alternative. Accepting learning-centred teaching (i.e. teaching that promotes deep and transformative learning) as a valid form of scholarship is the starting point. It then becomes straightforward to apply the principle of constructive alignment to identify appropriate activities and outcomes of this scholarship. Accordingly, the principle outcomes and indicators of scholarship would be the range and quality of the student learning elicited. The alignment, quality and rigour of the activities and resources which contribute to those outcomes can also be observed and assessed, formatively and summatively. Further, these assessments can be made using tools and frameworks developed in large scale, formal research on the conditions which influence students' learning and success (for example, Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). Last but not least, we can enrich the educative potential of this model by encouraging students and scholars to enhance their learning and teaching through critical, collective reflection (see Høyrup and Elkjaer, 2006) on what is, and on what should be, learned; and on how our institutions,

social relationships and individual practices should be organized so that learning can be best encouraged, accomplished and assessed.

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