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Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), Public relations, Active learning, Student success

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How SoTL Put a College Teacher on the Road to Success After a Two-Decade Detour

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Abstract

After a two-decade “detour,” a former elementary-school teacher returns to the classroom, this time as a college professor. Her discovery of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) and subsequent five-year SoTL journey are shared as 10 lessons that have influenced her teaching and benefited her students.

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Introduction

In returning to the classroom after a two-decade “detour” into another career, I was eager to share my 25 years of experience in public relations (PR) with students who wanted to learn about this growing profession. With my academic degrees in education plus several years as a teacher before carving out a successful PR career, I also thought the transition to teaching at a four-year college would be relatively easy; but I have had my share of challenges and missteps since becoming an assistant professor.

I discovered the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) after my first year back in the classroom, and I have been an enthusiastic proponent ever since. By sharing some of the SoTL lessons I have learned during my first five years as a college teacher, I hope others, especially those who have recently joined the SoTL community, will be encouraged to add their experiences to this important and rewarding area of study.

Discovering SoTL

After a very long absence from the world of academia, I faced teaching classes in a subject I had never formally studied. My initial challenge was how to share in a classroom setting the PR skills and knowledge I had learned in the workplace by asking questions, paying attention, solving problems, applying common sense, finding good mentors, and using skills I already possessed in new ways. I had never read a PR textbook.

Focusing on content, I planned my first semester of classes by identifying basic knowledge, skills, and tools PR students would need. Sadly, I did not immediately see how the ways I had learned about PR were also relevant. Instead, I relied primarily on lectures, class discussions, and written assignments, along with a few hands-on activities and team projects. My teaching style that first year was definitely more conventional than innovative. I had not yet discovered SoTL.

Fortunately for my students, I attended a Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) conference in Toronto, Canada the summer after my first year as a college teacher. There I found hundreds of college professors whose scholarship was focused on how to share the content of their disciplines in ways that would enhance student learning. While scholarly activity related to content has always been a hallmark of college teaching, I was excited to find scholarship efforts specifically focused on teaching and learning.

I left Canada energized by the prospect of incorporating ideas I had heard about into my second year of classes. My personal SoTL expedition had begun, and I immediately began to benefit from the work of those traveling the SoTL path before me. Over the past five years, the increasingly positive assessments from students regarding their learning experience in my classes have encouraged me to continue this journey.

10 Useful SoTL Lessons

SoTL Lesson 1: Creating a Learner-Centered Classroom

Enthusiasm and new ideas are a good start, but not the solution for improving student learning. In my second year as a college teacher, I faced teaching a large class of 120 students for the first time. To help prepare for this new challenge, I attended all the programs I could find at the STLHE conference and read articles about teaching large classes. Nonetheless, my efforts to create a supportive, learner-centered environment despite a lecture-hall venue did not work as well as I had hoped. I tried breaking my large class into smaller study-teams, providing peer mentoring opportunities, initiating online “round-table discussions,” and using a version of collaborative test taking described by Bloom (2009). However, these efforts were not embraced by everyone; some students resisted rather than enjoyed aspects of the class that were unfamiliar to them. Others liked the variety of activities but didn’t necessarily see them as helpful in learning about the many theories in this course. Worries about final grades seemed to be the biggest concern of most students, and a few accused me of using team projects as a way to “make them do all the work.”

While teaching this class, I found the goal of creating a learner-centered classroom was not easy. Being open to new ideas and then trying them are just the first steps: there is no guarantee that what works for one teacher, or situation, or discipline, or group of students will have the same results with different teachers, or situations, or disciplines, or students. Nonetheless, SoTL has helped me become a more effective teacher by being more conscious of how I teach and thinking about the potential impact of my teaching style, methods, and decisions.

SoTL Lesson 2: Learning the Language of SoTL

Near the end of my second year of college teaching, I was introduced to the concept of active learning during a workshop with Charles Bonwell. I realized I had been using aspects of his approach but had never attached a name to them. Bonwell’s work with active learning was more fully developed and researched than the small steps I had taken, and I wanted to learn more (see Bonwell & Eison, 1991).

Once I knew the terminology, it was easy to find active-learning articles by others in the SoTL literature. This led me to think about the importance of learning the language of SoTL, especially since this area of scholarship is often not discipline specific. Knowing commonly

used SoTL terminology helps teachers working in different academic areas find the work of others on a particular topic. Although I teach courses in public relations and writing, I have already used many ideas in my classroom that came from the SoTL efforts of those teaching theatre, computer programming, business, psychology, art, history, and other subjects.

SoTL Lesson 3: Using Classroom Simulations

With the support of work done by others on the benefits of using classroom simulations (Garard, Hunt, Lippert, & Paynton, 1998; Hertel & Millis, 2002; Petranek, Corey, & Black, 1992; Smith & Boyer, 1996), I tried an activity in my fourth semester as a college teacher that I had been thinking about but wasn't sure would work. Going beyond the use of a simulation involving only my class, I developed a collaborative simulation using subject experts from another department at the college and bringing in students from another class.

The goal of this collaborative simulation was to teach students in my advanced-level PR class about crisis communications in a way that would add drama, excitement, a sense of reality, and even emotional involvement. After three years, the results of this experiential activity have been impressive (Olson, 2010). Although time-consuming to develop and coordinate, using collaborative simulations has been the most exciting teaching experience I have encountered thus far.

SoTL Lesson 4: Letting Go of Lecturing

I was into my third year of college teaching before I began to significantly reduce the amount of time I spent lecturing, or as Finkel would say "telling."

A traditional way to shape a learning environment, of course, is to talk to students. But there are many other ways to design a learning environment. Some of these are more conducive to learning than a teacher's telling students what they are supposed to know (Finkel, 2000, p.8).

Yet despite a commitment to active learning and the other new teaching methods my SoTL excursions were finding, lectures still seemed to be an easier and quicker way to share information. I have been surprised by this reluctance to let go of a teaching style just because it is familiar and I do it reasonably well. On the other hand, how would students learn what they need to know if I didn't personally explain it to them?

Eventually, I figured it out. As I incorporated a greater range of teaching methods and activities into my classes, I also reduced the amount of time I was talking. By providing guidance to students when road blocks or problems arise, but letting them try to figure out a solution on their own first, I have found students are more engaged and satisfied with their time in my classes. They also do more talking as they experience the thrill of discovery, the pride of accomplishment, and the confidence that comes from learning how to learn and applying what they know to different situations.

SoTL Lesson 5: Asking for Student Feedback

After attending the International Lilly Conference on College Teaching in 2007, I was re-invigorated by the wealth of SoTL information and ideas being shared, including a variety of techniques for getting immediate feedback from students. These new tools have been very helpful in assessing whether my teaching efforts are working as well as I think they are.

Assigning one-page reflection papers after a field trip, guest speaker, or event gives me valuable information about how students are processing an experience, what they have learned and feel about it, and how they relate it to their lives. Reflection papers not only deepen a student's learning experience, they provide me with helpful insights that cannot be gleaned from scores on a test.

I will admit to some trepidation when I first began asking students for their honest feedback of my teaching at the mid-point of a semester. Did I really want to find out something I had been doing wasn't working? Would I be willing to make changes if the feedback indicated this was needed? The answer to both questions was an unqualified "yes." I needed to know about stumbling blocks to my students' comprehension of the material covered thus far. I also wanted to know what activities had helped them learn the most. SoTL studies what works in a classroom, but it must also discover what does not work. After reviewing the mid-term feedback from students, I always let them know what I have learned from their comments and what I will do differently, or continue to do more frequently, as a result.

SoTL Lesson 6: Problem-Based Learning

After discovering the concept of problem-based learning, I began looking for ways to incorporate this active-learning strategy into my classes.

Problem-based education is based on the assumptions that human beings evolved as individuals who are motivated to solve problems, and that problem solvers will seek and learn whatever knowledge is needed for successful problem solving. Even in cultures where students do not expect to participate actively in classes, problem-based learning can be successfully implemented (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006, p. 222).

I soon found that students definitely enjoy the challenge of figuring out what to do in a particular situation and that case studies about real-life situations provide a rich source of material. Another approach that has been successful in my classes is showing students the end result of a particular PR effort and asking them what might have been done to achieve that result. The goal is to engage students in creative problem-solving and stimulate them to think beyond routine tactics. As they take turns sharing their solutions, everyone has an opportunity to hear the variety of possible approaches, which often pushes students to consider more options when given their next assignment.

SoTL Lesson 7: Making It Real

Over the past five years, I have found the more clearly I can help students relate what they are learning to the "real world," the more important and relevant it becomes for them. I use real organizations for assignments whenever possible; and when a fictional situation or organization is used, I make sure it is realistic. I also look for case studies based on PR activities that were unsuccessful as well as those that succeeded. Reality means dealing with failure as well as positive outcomes.

When I began challenging college students to think beyond the borders of their campus by researching and discussing current situations PR professionals were actually dealing with, the thought-provoking discussions that resulted soon became a favorite activity for everyone. As students chose events they wanted to discuss, a more global perspective and awareness began to emerge.

I also take advantage of opportunities to bring the real world into my classroom. My students have done research projects for nonprofit organizations, written website copy for

our college's Provost, and created ads for local businesses. Guest speakers, field trips, and attending professional programs are additional activities that help make the subject matter of my classes more relevant and meaningful through the infusion of reality. These efforts can also result in the "significant learning experiences" described by L. Dee Fink. "In a powerful learning experience, students will be engaged in their own learning, there will be a high energy level associated with it, and the whole process will have important outcomes or results" (Fink, 2003, pp. 6-7).

SoTL Lesson 8: Service Learning

The ever-growing amount of information and technology-based skills students need to be successful in a future PR career is very challenging. Covering all the material they should learn becomes increasingly difficult, and service learning can be a useful approach. SoTL pioneers such as McKeachie (2006) have stressed the importance of teachers helping students understand how the content of a class relates to their lives. Students are more motivated to learn when they believe what they are learning is useful, and motivated students are more successful: service learning helps accomplish these goals.

In my PR Campaigns class, teams of students develop comprehensive PR plans for local nonprofit organizations. They are highly motivated to do the best job they possibly can and appreciate knowing their work in the classroom has a purpose beyond impressing a teacher. The amount of time and effort required of students in this course is much greater than in any of my other classes. Although some students feel overwhelmed by the workload, most of them are still positive about their overall experience. Anonymous comments on Instructional Assessment System (IAS) evaluations at the end of the semester often include statements such as this one in 2007: "The workload may be a little heavy at times, but all the work is worth it at the end of the semester." A student in 2008 noted, "This is a great, real-life class that provides awesome opportunities for students. If everyone takes advantage of the opportunities, they should have a great portfolio when done."

SoTL Lesson 9: Revising and Redesigning Classes

Designing courses to improve student learning is a frequent SoTL topic. Thus far in my teaching career, I have made the most changes in my advanced-level PR Campaigns course. The first year I decided to conduct this class as a PR agency with teams of account executives developing detailed PR plans for local nonprofit organizations. The next year a collaborative simulation involving crisis communications was added. By the third year, students were required to keep individual work logs and client contact sheets. After attending a workshop session in 2008 with Ken Bain, author of *What the Best College Teachers Do*, I revised the syllabus again in the fourth year to more clearly reflect the agency format. When students read the first statement – Congratulations, you're hired!— they immediately realize this class will be more like the workplace than a classroom.

SoTL Lesson 10: Adding to the SoTL Discussion

As a new college teacher, my first SoTL experiences were focused on how I might improve my teaching and the learning experience of my students. Then I began to think about questions such as: which teaching methods would be most effective in each of my classes, are there better ways to measure and assess student learning than tests and quizzes, what is the relationship between a student's interest in the material being taught and that student's success in the classroom? As I looked for answers to these questions, I began to understand how and why the scholarship of teaching and learning is so important.

While appreciating and benefiting from the SoTL activities of others, I did not think about sharing my own SoTL experiences until my fifth year of college teaching. Knowing there is

always more to learn, perhaps I do have something to contribute. Ultimately, we can all learn from people across the hall and across the world. It is already happening, and the SoTL discussion will get even better as more teacher-scholars join in.

Conclusion

My primary teaching goal has always been to help students grasp the nuances, ambiguities, challenges, and excitement of working in public relations. Throughout my first five years as a college teacher, I have tried various techniques to accomplish this goal. My discovery of SoTL has reinforced what I was already doing well and given me new ideas to try.

At the start of this essay, I admitted to not learning about PR in an academic setting as the students in my college classroom do. With the assistance of SoTL, however, I have found that asking questions, paying attention, solving problems, applying common sense, finding good mentors, and using skills in new ways not only worked for me two decades ago, they work for students today as well.

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