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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

On the Nature of Expertise in SoTL

In 2004, David Pace published a paper in *American Historical Review* making a compelling case for the growth of a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in history. In his title, Pace made reference to "the amateurs in the operating room" to describe the gap between the expertise historians bring to their research and that which they bring to their teaching. It is, of course, a gap that is not restricted to history.

The phrase "amateurs in the operating room" resonated with many of us back in 2004, and in many ways it still does. We like to think that the gap between disciplinary research expertise and what Lee Shulman (1986) called "pedagogical content knowledge" has narrowed somewhat in the last 12 years, especially with the proliferation of programs for graduate students and post-doctoral fellows to help them develop instructional skills and knowledge. But the gap still exists. And another gap has entered the discourse—the perceived gap between disciplinary research expertise and SoTL-based research expertise.

Many SoTL practitioners, including authors found in the pages of *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, started out conducting their inquiries in a discipline other than SoTL. They may have received intensive training for this research as they pursued advanced degrees. Now they conduct inquiries into teaching and learning. From whence springs the expertise to do so?

This question is fundamental to SoTL's impact and credibility. To answer it, we must take a close look at the concept of expertise.

For many, expertise is something that one attains through hard work and exposure to other experts. Perhaps that work involves the 10,000 trials advocated in Malcom Gladwell's (2008) book, *Outliers*. However it is attained, the assumption is that, once attained, this expertise is then employed to make and disseminate further discoveries. We might call this the "all-or-none law" of expertise. Expertise is viewed as a milestone after which everything about us is changed. We get our 10,000 trials t-shirt. From this view, expertise is akin to licensing. You have it for life, perhaps pending occasional re-tests to be sure you haven't lost it.

Academics who have been approached by members of the media to offer an expert opinion have probably encountered this view of expertise. Reporters are often unimpressed by answers to questions that are prefaced by "Actually, I'm still learning about this." They want to know: Are you an expert or are you not? They hope you are, because it is much more compelling to say that "experts have concluded…" than "learners have concluded…."

Even so, it is precisely the "all-or-none law" that makes us uncomfortable about the notion of expertise. It doesn't make sense to think of expertise as something fully attained and sustained. The whole idea of the academy is to push boundaries and grow in new directions. Yet it is proponents of the "all-or-none law" who will argue that SoTL research is conducted by non-experts—amateurs in a new operating theatre.

The problem isn't that SoTL research is conducted by "non-experts." The problem is that the all-or-none law is wrongheaded. Here we present alternative views on the nature of expertise—views we believe not only explain the very foundation of the SoTL "movement," but also invite other disciplines to re-think what it means to be an expert.

A hallmark of SoTL as a movement has been its developmental approach. By this we mean a focus on the growth of practitioners through scholarship related to teaching and learning. According to the developmental approach, one's expertise is continually evolving. There is no magical milestone, no 10,000 trial mark. We encourage colleagues, therefore, to consider *developmental expertise.* In our development, we may be considered to have more expertise than some others, but no one simply has "it."

We accept that people are at different places on their developmental journey and, thus, one might have more expertise relative to another. In the tradition of SoTL, we seek out those who are further along on a particular dimension (e.g., a research method, or a conceptualization of learning). In so doing, we do not diminish the expertise we bring to an endeavor; rather, we form teams where expertise is fitted like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. We can call this *collective expertise.* Many SoTL research collaborations feature collective expertise—someone is making an extensive study of group learning phenomena; another is delving into focus group methods; yet another is building knowledge related to teaching in a specific discipline.

We also acknowledge that expertise can be developed based on someone's specific experiences. These may involve formal educational opportunities, and they may involve first-hand encounters with phenomena. Reflective teachers develop expertise over the years, what we might call *experiential expertise.* This is not to say that expertise will automatically develop if one simply puts in the time. Careful reflection is required.

We believe that one key element of SoTL is its emphasis on reflection, and the invitation to explore just what it means to reflect. So what is the nature of SoTL practitioners' reflection as they develop their SoTL-based expertise? We may reflect in the spaces between teaching and learning experiences and one's "home discipline" expertise, asking, "How does my home expertise help me understand and explain my teaching and learning experiences? How do they not? And so how do I come to understand and explain these experiences?"

SoTL research, in its many forms, is defined as much by *who* is doing the research as by *what* is being done. Researchers often become participants in that same research. It takes advantage of experiential and collective expertise, and acknowledges that such expertise is constantly in development.

From these perspectives, it behooves us to take a humble approach to expertise. Colleagues who have made a career out of studying educational phenomena may justifiably raise an eyebrow at what could seem to be presumptuousness in SoTL researchers. Just because we teach doesn't make us experts at educational research, or even educational commentary, for that matter. That eyebrow might be raised even higher if SoTL scholars talk about long-standing concepts as though they have just invented them.

To avoid these pitfalls, we must enter into collective work humbly. Presenting oneself as a learner along a developmental path facilitates this. When we have worked with SoTL collaborations featuring science, arts, or humanities colleagues partnered with those from education, we have been heartened by the respect each participant shows for the other's developing expertise. In so doing, we must avoid the trap of focusing solely on our disciplinary expertise. SoTL work thrives on the kind of respect that keeps us out of such traps.

These views of expertise are particularly cogent for this issue of *TLI*—an issue in which many papers feature students as authors. We could invoke an apprenticeship model to justify inclusion of

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students as authors, but we think that sells these students short. It suggests that the students are merely the "trainees" beneath our qualitatively superior expertise. While it is perfectly reasonable and even helpful to acknowledge that we may be more developmentally advanced in some areas of expertise, it is equally important to acknowledge that we are all still trainees in our own ways. We believe that students bring experiential expertise critical to SoTL inquiry, along with whatever other formal learning they have done about SoTL. This vital experiential expertise contributes tangibly to the collective expertise of the team.

Camille Kandiko Howson and Saranne Weller's paper in this issue presents a fascinating portrait of student expertise. They observed, perhaps unsurprisingly, a resistance to referring to what the students bring as a kind of expertise:

> students were seen as experts of a received content, but were not necessarily considered to be able to judge if it was the right content or if the teaching was effective for other students. In particular, it was the perceived naivety, non-expert views, and jargon-free insights into teaching that were valued by lecturers and students. (Kandiko Howson & Weller, 2016, p. 10)

In SoTL, the students have a vantage point we try to capture as much as possible with varied and rich evidence of their learning experiences, but ultimately, we argue that including students' perspectives informed by experiential expertise from beginning to end of a SoTL inquiry—the focus of our inquiry, what questions we ask, how we talk and write about students and instructors—makes the field stronger.

Finally, the belief that expertise is continually developing should not be viewed as a threat to the rigour of the field. Research and writing teams push each other to employ their collective expertise in the best possible ways and are subject to the most rigorous reviews from yet another collective. In this way, peer review isn't something that happens only when a paper is submitted to *TLI* for consideration. The team dynamic that's so frequently part of SoTL features an iterative form of peer review *during the project,* before the formal peer reviewers are called in for post-project review and feedback. *TLI* takes its responsibility in this process very seriously—as seriously as its role to support and foster development of this working in the field.

Developmental, experiential, and collective approaches to expertise undergird what SoTL is about—learners who learn together for the betterment of teaching and learning. To dismiss the work because it is not being conducted by "real experts" is to miss this vital point and the essence of our work. In SoTL, we understand that student learning is, by definition, developmental. As educators, our hope, support, and empathy are predicated on this understanding. A developmental model of expertise urges us to bring these same driving forces to our own learning as SoTL academics.

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