

Invited Essay

Making a difference: Application of SoTL to enhance learning

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Abstract: In this essay, I remind readers of the importance of using SoTL work in a range of ways and settings at different levels to increase our impact on student learning as well as institutional and disciplinary cultures. I briefly discuss and illustrate six strategies already in use on which we can build.

Keywords: application strategies, enhance learning, impact

I. Introduction.

Many have noted, informally, that the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) is a social movement.² This movement would be a limited, probably reform, social movement as it is primarily in one social institution – education, affecting only certain segments of the population, and has a goal to improve but not replace the current educational system. We have seen the factors that are the impetus to the movement including renewed interest in teaching and learning in higher education, new knowledge about learning and the brain, pressures for accountability, increasing diversity of our students, and the need to understand the impact of rapidly changing technology. Frustration by members is another feature of social movements, for example, frustration with teaching-learning problems and not knowing what we need to know about learning, as well as with the reward structure in institutions of higher education. Members of social movements have a shared set of beliefs including that teaching and learning are important, that we can and should teach and change institutional cultures based on evidence about our students' learning, and that a teaching commons is critical to our work (Huber & Hutchings, 2005). Mobilization of resources and power is required for a social movement to coalesce and grow. SoTL has organizations, conferences, journals, and outspoken leaders. Our outside allies include foundations, accreditation agencies, and publishers. We are beyond the emergent stage of social movements and are probably functioning at the coalescence or bureaucratization stages but have not begun to decline³ --common stages in the life cycle of social movements.

My goal in this essay is to describe and illustrate strategies to make a greater difference with, and increase the impact of, SoTL in terms of enhancing learning at multiple levels and in multiple contexts...in and beyond an individual classroom (e.g., McKinney, 2007, 2010, 2012b). We want to make a difference and have a positive impact on teaching, student learning, and institutional and disciplinary cultures. As members of this social movement, we must be active social change agents using SoTL to create change. Though others have emphasized how cultural change within an institution is needed to support and grow SoTL (e.g., Cambridge, 2004;

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² For readers interested in social movements and collective behavior more generally, there are many available classic works including, for example, Blumer, Herbert. 1969. "Collective Behavior" in *Principles of Sociology* (R.E. Park, ed.). NY: Barnes and Noble; Smelser, Neil. 1962. *Theory of Collective Behavior*. New York. Free Press; Tilly, Charles. 1978. *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

³ Decline is not, necessarily, a negative thing as it may mean the movement has succeeded and thus the movement is no longer necessary and/or has become an established part of the mainstream institution or society.

Ginsberg and Bernstein, 2011), my main focus is on how SoTL can promote change in teaching/learning, institutions, and disciplines.

As drawn from Louis Elton (2000) and noted by others (Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011), we need to do things better and do better things. Some of the ways we can make a difference with SoTL fit each of these two goals. I will briefly discuss and illustrate six strategies to increase our impact and make a greater difference with the scholarship of teaching and learning. These strategies include: making our SoTL work public in innovative ways and to multiple audiences; engaging in a SoTL research agenda and connecting with others doing similar work; doing SoTL that fills the gaps in the extant SoTL literature; increasing student voices in SoTL; making applications of own or others' SoTL work at classroom and broader, more 'macro' levels; and being a social change agent in various contexts for SoTL and those doing SoTL.

II. Strategies.

A. By Making our SoTL Work Public.

To state the obvious, and by definition, we should be making our SoTL work public and doing a better job at that. What might that mean? Certainly we need to make our work public for multiple audiences using multiple mechanisms. That is, it is important to share our work with academic colleagues in our institution and our discipline as well as members of tenure and promotion committees using traditional mechanisms such as presentations and publications. SoTL, however, will not have the impact we desire, and our students deserve, without also reaching out to colleagues in other disciplines, students, accreditation staff, administrators, and members of the larger community or public. We can draw on traditional tools such as conferences, journal articles, or books but must also make greater use of public/press interviews, newsletters, web representations, performances, readings, videos, and structured conversations.

Sharing, of course, has the potential for impact in many ways including offering an informative literature review to others, providing an example of the use of theory, modeling questions and methodologies that might be replicated, contributing a study that is one piece of the larger puzzle, helping to place SoTL results in context (e.g., Gibbs, 2010), helping students learn how to learn, (see McKinney, 2012b for more on students as our audience), and triggering reflection by others about their teaching and/or learning.

Student-faculty structured conversations, or more formal seminars on learning, where members of your institutional community meet to share and discuss local or other appropriate SoTL results, is one example of doing this different/better. On my campus, another example is the use of a video documentary as both the method to study perceived learning from involvement in civic engagement experiences as well as to represent this work and make it public via presentations, on line access, and live showings of the video to multiple audiences in and outside the university. At the U. S. Air Force Academy, explicit invitations are made to groups of students to attend the papers and posters presented by faculty at their annual SoTL Forum. Venturing out of our disciplinary comfort zone to present or publish in a cross-discipline SoTL journal or a multi-discipline SoTL web repository is another general example.

B. By Engaging in a SoTL Research Agenda and Connecting with Others Doing Similar Work.

There have been wonderful presentations and publications about building the commons (Huber & Hutchings, 2005; Linkon & Roxa, 2011) and using technology to access and connect our work (Bass & Eynon, 2009). In addition, the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and other organizations, encourage and support collaboration on SoTL projects in a variety of ways. Yet much SoTL work still occurs in various forms of isolation: the one SoTL scholar in each department; a scholar engaging in only one SoTL project or a series of unconnected projects; some departments or disciplines in an institution active in SoTL while others have little or no SoTL tradition. This isolation limits our impact as we fail to learn from applying and building on our own and others' work via connected and collaborative studies. This isolation stunts the growth of the SoTL commons.

Thus, to a greater degree than we are currently doing, we need to synthesize our SoTL work across individual efforts or projects, and replicate or adapt the SoTL work of others to new contexts. Many of us are experienced at collaborations, synthesis, and commons building within our discipline or institution. But we must apply and adapt those experiences to the field of SoTL both by being lifelong learners willing to develop expertise in this field and by doing SoTL that crosses classroom, institutional, national, and disciplinary boundaries.

Examples of building connections with others and across our own and others' work include the Indiana University Communities of Inquiry—for example, a group of Chemists studying how to enhance student achievement or a group of cross-discipline researchers focusing on the use of visual methods to enhance learning in general education classes. I have been working on a series of connected studies over a seven-year period about perceived and actual learning by our sociology majors. There are edited books that bring together the work of diverse scholars with distinct but related projects or ideas in the field such as SoTL on learning about citizenship (Smith, Nowacek, & Bernstein, 2010) or interdisciplinary SoTL (McKinney, in press), to name only two. The Carnegie Foundation, Randy Bass at Georgetown University, and others have worked to build online repositories of SoTL work that can enhance collaboration and synthesis.

C. By Doing SoTL that Helps Fill Gaps in the SoTL Literature.

As in any field, one way to move the field forward and increase impact is to engage in projects that help to fill the gaps in the existing literature and knowledge base. I urge you to think about the gaps you see in the field of SoTL both within your discipline and across disciplines. I have noted several that I believe are evident (McKinney, 2010). These include insufficient attention to the following: co- and extra-curricular learning experiences, learning by graduate students, the explicit use of “theory” (Hutchings & Huber, 2007), the intervening processes or why/how (see McKinney, 2012b for a more detailed discussion of this gap), and the ‘big’ or common questions (cross-discipline, cross-national, and cross-institutional).

What might such efforts to fill these gaps look like? A colleague and I are conducting an exploratory study of the perceived learning outcomes of a registered student organization sport club (The Illinois State University Equestrian Club and Team). Other colleagues have conducted a longitudinal (six years!) study of the impact on graduate student learning of working with undergraduates in a service learning activity (McCluskey-Titus & Troxel, 2011). One of the groups in the last two phases of the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and

Learning (CASTL) has focused on cross-institutional and cross-national work on undergraduate research. We need more studies that measure the contextual and intervening processes (the how and why) between our teaching interventions and evidence of learning such as a study by Livshin (2011) who gathered qualitative data from students to measure both their learning of concepts related to social capital as well as to obtain student beliefs about how and why their work in groups facilitated this learning.

D. By Increasing Student Voices in SoTL.

Werder and Otis (2010) offer an edited volume focusing on engaging student voices in the study of teaching and learning. In the early years of SoTL, students were our research participants --the subjects of our projects. We have moved, and continue to move, toward involving students, and benefitting from their lived expertise, as research collaborators. This may involve a range of roles (McKinney, Jarvis, Creasey, & Herrmann, 2010) from providing basic research assistance to full partnerships to students as lead or sole SoTL researchers. And, as noted earlier, student voices can be better heard when we take students seriously as a primary audience for our SoTL work.

Thus, through various mechanisms such as eligibility requirements for internal SoTL grant applications, we can encourage and support SoTL research teams that include one or more student co-researchers. Institutions such as Elon University, for example, have serious efforts to engage faculty-student collaborations on course design or redesign. We can invite students to read, synthesize, apply, and react to SoTL work in their major program via orientation courses or student disciplinary clubs.

E. By Making Applications of Own or Others' SoTL Work at the Program, Department, College, or Institutional Levels.

Though the original nature, perhaps the heart, of SoTL was disciplinary and classroom based, another way to increase impact is to move beyond the classroom level to the program, department, college, and institutional levels. There are many existing mechanisms or processes as well as partnerships we can use to apply our SoTL work at these levels. Some of these include assessment, curriculum design/reform, accreditation, strategic planning, program review, faculty development, budget requests, general education, and student affairs. We can also make a greater difference by connecting our SoTL work, when appropriate, to existing, high priority institutional initiatives.

For example, at my (and many other) institutions, we are invested --as one major institutional initiative-- in the American Democracy Project and civic engagement experiences. Thus, we have internal funds for course redesign and for internal grants for SoTL studies of such experiences. Numerous people have discussed the connections (similarities, differences, value across) between assessment and SoTL projects (e.g., Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011; McKinney, 2006). Sullivan (2011) discusses the role of SoTL in an institution-wide change agenda at an Irish university, including in new institutional policies. A SoTL project and its role in faculty development and collaboration within a dental school curriculum is presented by Hoover and Lyon (2011).

F. As a Social Change Agent in Your Institution and Discipline.

Finally, we can --and must if we want to make a greater difference and increase our impact-- take on the role of social change agent. We can each work to push the SoTL movement forward and use it to promote positive change in a wide range of ways. The two most likely settings for such activism are your institution and your discipline. Actions you can take in your institution include, for example, supporting junior faculty and graduate students in their SoTL work, co-opting respected colleagues as allies in the movement, pushing for more SoTL resources on your campus, helping with faculty development about SoTL, sending relevant SoTL citations and results to institutional decision makers, educating those making decisions about promotions and tenure about the nature and value of SoTL work, and volunteering to help rework the reward system to increase the value given to SoTL.

Similarly, we can take actions at the disciplinary level. You can help to connect people in your discipline to the larger, cross-discipline SoTL movement by sharing information on SoTL journals and conferences, and inviting disciplinary colleagues new to SoTL to attend such conferences or co-author presentations. You can volunteer to lead a workshop or organize a session on SoTL and/or push for a plenary or keynote on SoTL at your disciplinary conference. Consider the existing structures (or needed structures) within your disciplinary society and work to make sure SoTL is important in any 'teaching-learning' subgroup or interest group. Depending on the culture of your discipline, perhaps you can help establish an award or grant for SoTL work in your disciplinary organization. Write an essay about the current status of SoTL (and key findings, suggestions for important issues to study...) in your discipline and present or publish it in a disciplinary outlet.

III. Conclusion.

As we move to do things better and do better things in SoTL --in an effort to make a greater difference and increase our impact-- we move beyond our discipline and classroom. Thus, questions about the identity of SoTL, the nature of the commons, the size of the tent, and whether SoTL 'travels' are raised (e.g., Huber, 2009; Huber, Hutchings, & Ciccone, 2011; Huber & Hutchings, 2005; Linkon & Roxa, 2011). As we move to program, institutional or cross-institutional work, how is this SoTL distinct from assessment or traditional educational research? And does that matter? When is SoTL beyond the classroom no longer SoTL? Thus, as we continue to develop as a field and as we work to make a difference, we must also continue to think about our identity, and the role or place of identity in the social movement of SoTL.

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