

# **Building Scholarly Communities: Supporting the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning with Learning Communities**

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## **Abstract:**

*This special issue of Transformative Dialogues offers essays reporting on activities and experiences of the member institutions of a Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) Institutional Leadership initiative group. Our group, Building Scholarly Communities, exists at the intersection of two major movements in higher education: Faculty Learning Communities and the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning (SoTL). These two movements have guided us in our work to develop local and international multidisciplinary SoTL communities. In this introductory article, we briefly review the history and aims of the Faculty and Professional Learning Communities and Scholarship of Teaching and Learning movements in contemporary higher education. We seek to locate our CASTL group at the nexus of these larger movements, to better explicate our efforts, and to provide examples of how this combination (learning communities and SoTL) supports the advancement of teaching and learning at our various institutions.*

## **Key Words:**

Building scholarly communities, faculty learning communities, scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), CASTL, institutional leadership, higher education.

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## **Introduction**

Since the publication of Boyer's Scholarship Reconsidered in 1990, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching have supported a wide range of activities

to encourage Scholarship of Teaching & Learning (SoTL). The Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning facilitated this movement over the course of more than a decade, beginning with the Carnegie Scholars Programs, which included 140 faculty members from many different fields and institutions. This highly competitive program supported five cohorts of scholars to develop their skills in SoTL and to spend focused time investigating teaching and learning and publishing this work (see <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/>).

To expand these efforts beyond work of individual scholars, CASTL has also organized two programs that recruited and grouped teams from many institutions around shared themes and interests, in order to “cultivate the conditions necessary to support the scholarship of teaching and learning” (<http://carnegiefoundation.org>). Twelve clusters of institutions worked on a range of projects between 2002 and 2005 in the Campus Leadership Clusters program, and another 14 leadership theme groups are currently part of the Institutional Leadership Program from 2006 to 2009. In all, at least 242 institutions were represented in these projects, and many others were involved as affiliates. These programs greatly expanded the conversations about teaching and learning and the awareness of, the commitment to, and the capacity for SoTL across disciplines and in many institutions.

For example, under the aegis of the Institutional Leadership Program, the group which is providing the essays for this issue of transformational dialogs was brought together. This consortium on building scholarly communities, comprised of seven post-secondary institutions, Dartmouth College, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Queen’s University, Ryerson University, Southeast Missouri State University, and the University of Glasgow coordinated by The Ohio State University. After the first two years, Dartmouth was unable to continue due to staffing changes.

Over a four-year period, representatives from these institutions have met regularly and communicated electronically even more frequently to compare ways they have successfully developed, or unsuccessfully tried to develop, SoTL capital within their own universities and among communities of their faculty colleagues. These institutions were brought together by Carnegie staff because each institution’s application included communities to support local SoTL efforts, and because these efforts were linked at each institution with a teaching support center as an important catalyst.

Our collaborations to date include our work towards encouraging the academic culture to recognize a continuum of scholarship of teaching and learning activities, establishing common and rigorous outcome measures with personal, professional, and programmatic implications, and disseminating successful scholarship of teaching and learning initiatives. As such, our CASTL institutional members are building awareness, understanding, support, and practice of scholarship of teaching and learning, within and beyond our local communities.

## **Scholarship of Teaching & Learning**

In *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (1990, 1997), Ernest L. Boyer proposed a conception of multiple scholarships: Scholarship of Discovery, of Integration, of Application, and of Teaching. Boyer's concept evolved over time,

generating wider focus on scholarly activity and re-evaluation of the status of teaching (and other activities) relative to research in higher education, and since its publication there has been much debate around the issue of SoTL (for example, Glassick, Huber, & Maeroff 1997; Nicholls 2004; Kreber 2002a), although most scholars agree on three crucial elements (Martin et al., 1999; Kreber, 2002b; Richlin 1993, 2001; Trigwell & Shale, 2004):

- Engagement with the scholarly literature on teaching and learning
- Dissemination of aspects of the practitioner's scholarly practice
- Reflection on practice and student learning

More recently, Huber and Hutchings (2005) explored the progress of SoTL work in changing the university in *The Advancement of Learning: Building the Teaching Commons*.

Beginning in 2004, the International Society for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning has become the premier association and meeting for university faculty across all disciplines that are engaged in SoTL work. These conferences have become one of the venues where our CASTL community regularly meets in person.

At each of our institutions, a small group of faculty members began to be interested in doing SoTL. These faculty members sought assistance and encouragement from their teaching centers; the teaching centers tried to bring these faculty members together to support each other. When the Carnegie Foundation requested proposals, in 2006, for institutions to participate in the three year CASTL Institutional Leadership Program, to build "on the influential work undertaken by colleges and universities, campus centers and educational organizations, scholarly and professional societies, and CASTL Campus Program Leadership Clusters, to facilitate collaboration among institutions with demonstrated commitment to and capacity for action, inquiry and innovation in the scholarship of teaching and learning," each of our institutions applied. Because we each applied separately for CASTL Institutional Leadership Program, the Carnegie staff acted as a "matchmaker," grouping us together as each institution was seeking to build community around SoTL work among our faculty members.

## **Faculty and Professional Learning Communities**

Learning communities have a rich history in North America, with roots stemming from the early work of Meiklejohn (1932) and Dewey (1933). This early emphasis was student oriented and focused on the needs of the students. Over the years, the building and sustaining of learning communities have gained momentum, and work by Lave and Wenger (1991) cemented the concept of communities of practice applied to different work settings.

Beginning in the early 1980s, the concept of learning in community has been very successfully used to develop teaching skills, knowledge, and confidence of university faculty. The Alumni Teaching Scholars program at Miami University was the pioneer in this movement. Milt Cox has been the director of this program since its inception. Cox defines a "faculty learning community (FLC) as a group of trans-disciplinary faculty, graduate students and professional staff group of size 6-15 or more (8 to 12 is the recommended size) engaging in an active, collaborative, yearlong program with a

curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning and with frequent seminars and activities that provide learning, development, transdisciplinarity, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and community building”

(<http://www.units.muohio.edu/flc/index.php>).

Over the last three decades, Cox and his team have expanded their program from communities of early-career faculty to include senior faculty communities and topic based communities on many issues and pedagogical innovations. They also used support from the Ohio Board of Regents and the US Department of Education’s Fund for Improvement in Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) to disseminate FLCs to many other institutions.

Evidence from surveys and interviews of past participants shows that “FLCs increase faculty interest in teaching and learning and provide safety and support for faculty to investigate, attempt, assess, and adopt new (to them) methods.” Several of our institutions had already adopted this model of community support for other teaching enhancement efforts. Others had taken up similar community of practice models, such as Lave and Wenger or Shaffer and Anundsen. Thus, each of our institutional plans for participating in the CASTL Leadership Program included seeking to build capacity for SoTL through faculty learning communities.

### **Building SoTL Communities – CASTL Cluster**

We defined a learning community at the most basic level as a group of individuals who are working towards the primary goal of building knowledge. Shaffer and Anundsen (1993) suggested that learning communities are created when members: participate in common practice, depend on one another, make decisions together, identify themselves as part of something larger than the sum of their individual relationships, and commit themselves for the long term to their own, each other’s, and the group’s well-being.

Based on Shaffer and Anundsen’s work, we see our common practice as the foci of our group, building scholarly communities. Over the years, we have also learned to depend on one another to create a larger SoTL agenda than we could have individually at our own institutions and all decisions concerning the group have been made together. The cache of belonging to the CASTL Leadership program has automatically made each of our institutions part of a larger entity and the three year timeline for our project has helped to commit to the long-term well-being of our community.

Embracing SoTL within a learning community has been energizing for our CASTL cluster, as collectively we have been able to move the SoTL agenda at each of our individual institutions through increased recognition and value of this type of scholarly work. Developing a strong, interdisciplinary learning community has been an effective means to build the capacity for SoTL, creating the "teaching commons" (Huber & Hutchings, 2005) to make a greater difference than individual efforts could.

Over the last three years, our group has worked hard to learn how to be a learning community, working towards the common goal of promoting SoTL, institutionally and as a CASTL cluster. We have worked on common projects, including a publicly accessible website (<http://cstl.semo.edu/castl/>), a SoTL database of in progress and completed

SoTL projects from each of our institutions, and the writing of this special edition of *Transformative Dialogues*.

Similar to other communities, we initially needed to find the best means to communicate with each other (Cox, 2001). For example, our group consisted of seven institutions representing three countries and two continents (with 5 time zones). To communicate we decided to use email listservs, blogs, telephone conference calls, and in person meetings – each of which helped to build the community and move forward the SoTL movement. We also had to learn each other’s national languages about higher education (for example, “faculty” as individual members of academic staff or “Faculty” as an administrative grouping of departments), and each other’s institutional mandates, missions, national contexts, and internal politics. We also needed to acknowledge important differences of individual’s position within their institutions (centralized teaching support unit, etc.), and the range of financial resources and staffing provided to each project by their administration. The impact of affiliation with Carnegie has varied at each institution because of our differing contexts.

The other, crucial community formation issue was the desire to define SoTL within our CASTL cluster, as our early conversations identified a definite difference in how we each described or defined SoTL. In our first two, face-to-face meetings, we came to agree that while we used many of the same words to describe this work, we have divergent definitions arising from our local contexts. We agreed not to attempt to force agreement, but to outline our commonalities and diversity:

### **Commonalities among Institutions**

- Sharing - going public by the practitioner – with examples of SoTL (cross-discipline/within discipline, workshops, conversations, publishing, conference, institutes, seminars)
- Sharing – going public about engaging practitioners in How to do SoTL, e.g. sessions on how to develop research questions, ethics and protocols, what is action research
- Peer support – (practitioner-practitioner), e.g. learning communities, regular meetings of people in process of undertaking SoTL initiatives
- Institutional support – (central teaching and learning with practitioners), e.g., one to one meetings, collaborations, rewards and recognition
- Reflection – self on practice
- Objective – To improve teaching and learning
- Approach – An investigation into teaching learning

### **Diversity among Institutions**

- The nature of the methodologies used to investigate
- While we agree that an inquiry requires some methods the recognized approaches to the inquiry were not common. For some SoTL constitutes personal educational research, where it was of another’s teaching informed by field or prior investigations – what’s already out there
- Interdisciplinary

- Intradisciplinary – Of use within a discipline/faculty
- Sharing – going public by supporting practitioners in developing academic practice, e.g., new faculty courses, assessment, evaluation.  
This was considered to be traditional educational research and not distinctly SoTL. Other differences were approaches to SoTL such as an action research investigation or developing a teaching philosophy.

Conceptualization of key ideas or terms is typical of learning communities and to address this issue we attempted to collectively draft a definition of what SoTL would like in our CASTL context. SoTL within our group was minimally defined as the structured inquiry into one's own teaching and one's students learning, leading to dissemination of findings.

## Sharing Experience

The articles that follow in this special issue of *Transformative Dialogues* will provide deeper examples of the efforts of each of our member institutions and the impact of their work. Each essay was drafted by its authors, in conversation with their local colleagues and drafts were shared among the Cluster members for feedback. We met together at Kwantlen Polytechnic University for a collaborative, peer review session. At this meeting, we agreed not to attempt to homogenize the individual voices of the members of our group, but to honor these differences. The following are brief synopses of the articles which celebrate the work of our community over the past three years.

### [Kwantlen Polytechnic University](#)

In this paper, we look at the evolution of scholarly activities at Kwantlen and the ways scholars can communicate and share in a variety of informal and formal venues. This continuum of reflection and development of scholarly community is an ongoing effort that will thrive well past the end of the CASTL project. Through this continuum, we are able to provide the background and context of our work, present our initial proposal objectives for the Carnegie cluster and describe accomplishments and share our future aspirations.

### [Queen's University](#)

Engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) has become an increasingly important dimension of the work of teachers in higher education. An underlying reason is the academy's desire to create a climate where teaching is a visible and therefore valued activity, particularly as it relates to understanding and improving student learning (Huber, 2004). Supporting individual faculty members' initiatives thereby encouraging the development of communities of practice, is one strategy adopted to advance SoTL. A second strategy is to ensure that SoTL is well represented and promoted through institutional reward systems such as promotion policies (Bunton & Mallon, 2007; Feder & Madara, 2008; O'Meara, 2005; Simpson et al. 2004; Simpson et al, 2007). Indeed, it is suggested that institution-wide strategies are critical to creating an organizational culture in which individual faculty initiatives focusing on SoTL can flourish (Gallos, 2008). In this article we document one university's development of an infrastructure to support faculty wishing to engage in SoTL. We then examine the extent to which the institution-wide process for academic promotion

encourages advancement through SoTL. This is accomplished by examining how department heads represent SoTL as a viable pathway for academic advancement. Preliminary results indicate a high degree of variation amongst department heads with respect to their understanding and support of the possibility of academic advancement through SoTL. It is argued that this lack of consistency contributes to “cultural inertia”. Cultural inertia exists when there is a disconnect between the institutional intention to value SoTL versus the actual practice of academic promotion (Simpson et al, 2007). The paper concludes by presenting strategies required to address this disconnect. It is suggested that these strategies will lead to a culture where academic advancement through SoTL is well accepted and forms a critical foundation for building communities of practice.

### **Ryerson University**

Ryerson University has undergone major restructuring in a short period of time. Since 1993, Ryerson has become a degree-granting institution and expanded its post-graduate degree programs as a means to further its commitment to high-quality education. Ryerson’s change in status and enhanced focus on scholarship provides a watershed moment for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at the University. This paper introduces our working definition of SoTL, explains the circumstances leading to the watershed moment at Ryerson, and outlines the necessary steps to entrench SoTL at Ryerson. The paper concludes with a reflection upon the lessons learned from other universities attempting a similar task. Our efforts to advance the importance of SoTL may be misdirected until other researchers and teachers understand the role of SoTL in higher education environments. SoTL is sometimes viewed as an illegitimate form of scholarly activity because it does not always end with a peer-reviewed journal paper. This misrepresentation of SoTL needs to be corrected in order to further advance the scholarship and learning and educational opportunities SoTL provides to students.

### **Southeast Missouri State University**

Communities are built on a foundation of shared commitments, goals, and ideals. The Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning provides the infrastructure necessary to organize, support, and illuminate SoTL efforts, establishing communities within and across disciplines and institutions. Our experience with CASTL demonstrates that programs that encourage and reward the willful participation in a SoTL Community –be it through our SoTL Fellows Program, the CASTL Campus Program, or the CASTL Institutional Leadership Program—have a direct, profound, and lasting impact on the legitimacy, quality, and proliferation of scholarly work, as well teaching innovation and learning outcomes.

### **The Ohio State University**

Strengthening the bonds among university educators for the scholarship of teaching and learning is indeed an arduous task. The pursuit of tenure and promotion, the establishment of an international reputation for one’s research among colleagues in the same narrow specialty areas, and other features of university life present substantial challenges to building scholarly communities of faculty and staff across the complex structures and rewards systems of modern universities. This essay introduces the concept of “SoTL capital” and describes four interrelated types of capital associated with

the promotion of scholarly communities devoted to inquiry regarding teaching excellence. It discusses the development and strengthening of “horizontal networks” of like-minded faculty within the context of a large and busy university, such as Ohio State.

### University of Glasgow

The paper from the University of Glasgow describes the changing institutional context when a research-intensive university in the UK makes the decision to bring learning and teaching more to the fore. The authors outline the initiatives and processes that have been instigated to encourage campus engagement with learning and teaching in general and with SoTL, a relatively new concept in the UK, in particular.

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