

SoTL's Watershed Moment: A Critical Turning Point for SoTL at Ryerson University

*P. Robinson, J. Gingras, L. Cooper, J. Waddell and E. Davidge
Ryerson University*

Authors' contact Information

*Pamela Robinson, Ryerson University, 350 Victoria Street, Toronto,
Ontario, Canada M5B 2K3*

email: pamela.robinson@ryerson.ca

*Jacqui Gingras, Ryerson University, 350 Victoria Street, Toronto,
Ontario, Canada M5B 2K3*

email: jgingras@ryerson.ca

*Linda Cooper, Ryerson University, 350 Victoria Street, Toronto,
Ontario, Canada M5B 2K3*

email: lcooper@ryerson.ca

*J. Waddell, Ryerson University, 350 Victoria Street, Toronto, Ontario,
Canada M5B 2K3*

email: jwaddell@ryerson.ca

*E. Davidge, Ryerson University, 350 Victoria Street, Toronto, Ontario,
Canada M5B 2K3*

email: edavidge@ryerson.ca

Abstract:

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.

Key Words:

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL); Centre for the Advancement of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL); Faculty of Community Services (FCS); Ryerson University; Academic Plan.

Introduction

Ryerson University is a publicly funded university located in the downtown of Canada's largest city, Toronto. While many may identify Ryerson with its old name, Ryerson Polytechnic, Ryerson became a degree-granting institution in 1993 and in 2002 changed its name to Ryerson University. Since its founding as the Ryerson Institute of Technology in 1948, the University's mandate has always been linked with an emphasis on bridging the gaps between theory and practice and a strong commitment to high-quality undergraduate education. With Ryerson's change in status has come a broadening of its educational programming. There are now more than 24,000 students enrolled in 95 PhD, master's, and undergraduate programs in the Faculties of Arts; Communication and Design; Community Services; Engineering, Architecture and Science; and the Ted Rogers School of Management. This increase in graduate programs has brought new institutional priorities that include a strong emphasis on high-caliber research output in addition to an ongoing commitment to undergraduate education and community partnerships.

In the 2008-2009 academic year, the university finds itself at a critical juncture in terms of the evolution of teaching and research arising from changes in leadership, faculty profiles, and institutional priorities. As faculty engaged in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), we feel that this juncture presents a watershed moment for creating an institutional culture that embraces, institutionalizes and advances SoTL practice. With concerted and strategic action, we feel the opportunity exists for SoTL to become a meaningful part of the faculty's mission within the context of the university. Conversely, the absence of strategic action at this point could result in the university's evolution (and faculty by association) moving in a direction whereby SoTL activities would be peripheral to core research-oriented priorities and, as such, wither away. This paper seeks to respond to the following question: what steps does a Faculty within a university undergoing the transition from an undergraduate teaching institution to a research-oriented graduate degree granting institution need to take to firmly entrench SoTL practice at a critical juncture in the University's progress?

Accordingly, in this paper we introduce our working definition of SoTL and explain the circumstances leading to the watershed moment at Ryerson. Next, we draw from the experiences of other SoTL communities to consider strategically what steps we might take to entrench SoTL at Ryerson; and finally, we reflect upon what lessons might be learned from other institutions facing a similar constellation of circumstances.

SoTL at FCS Ryerson

Since 1999, the Faculty of Community Services (FCS) has supported a Learning and Teaching Committee (L&T Committee), comprised of faculty from the various schools in FCS and a representative from the university-wide Learning and Teaching

Office (LTO), who was also a FCS faculty member. This committee formed to advance and improve learning and teaching methodologies, projects and research; provide funding support secured through grant competitions for scholarly research focused on learning and teaching; increase awareness about the scholarship of teaching within the faculty; and recognize teaching excellence through the adjudication of faculty-wide teaching excellence awards. In the 2005-2006 academic year, L&T Committee members began a sustained dialogue about the need to target and highlight the scholarship of teaching and learning as distinct from programme efforts to enhance teaching. This dialogue led to the application to establish a FCS Centre for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL). Shortly after the establishment of the centre, an application for membership in the Carnegie CASTL "Building Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Communities" Institutional Leadership program was submitted by centre members, which resulted in acceptance to the "Building Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Communities" cluster (Southeast Missouri State University, 2009).

With this Centre established, its Associates (faculty members from Nursing, Nutrition, Social Work, and Urban and Regional Planning) began to explore how SoTL activities at FCS might be supported and encouraged. This research centre is one of eight in the Faculty of Community Services, and it is important to note that the Learning and Teaching Committee continues to exist pursuing its own mandate of supporting faculty development related to promoting teaching excellence as distinct, but not mutually exclusive from the mandate of the Centre.

Through our early efforts in establishing the Centre, it became apparent that we needed a working definition to frame the Centre's work. However, as our work unfolded, we realized in the 2008-09 academic year that our early definition did not speak effectively to the unique characteristics of our faculty, nor did we feel it allowed us to appropriately position our work within the shifting culture of research activities. Rather than adopting a definition from another source, our Centre's colleagues felt the need to create our own working definition that responded to our current situation at Ryerson. For example, in our efforts to define our work, we considered a range of other working SoTL definitions and found that, across the range, the starting point for SoTL consistently emerged from faculty members' observations and/or experiences. The Faculty of Community Services is home to ten professional schools¹ that all have strong educational connections to their related communities of practice. Accordingly, we could foresee situations whereby our students, through placement experiences, or our community-based practitioner placement hosts might identify experiences warranting a SoTL inquiry. In response, after long deliberation, we now define the scholarship of teaching and learning:

as critical inquiry and dissemination regarding processes and outcomes of teaching and learning. The impetus for the inquiry on teaching and learning can emerge from student, faculty or practitioners' experiences and questions. Like all other scholarship, SoTL is ethical, deliberate, reflexive, and rigorous; it is

¹ The Schools within the Faculty of Community Services include Child and Youth Care, Disability Studies, Early Childhood Education, Health Services Management, Midwifery, Nursing, Nutrition, Occupational and Public Health, Social Work, and Urban and Regional Planning.

grounded in theory and draws from a wide range and mixture of research methods. Public dissemination of SoTL findings may take a variety of forms across Boyer's four scholarships (discovery, integration, application and teaching). Centre members also place significant emphasis on formal and informal peer-review of the methods and findings. Our SoTL activities are targeted toward critical inquiry that will improve student learning experiences; faculty's engagement in their teaching, research and practice; and the practice of our disciplines in the field and our communities.

Our definition emphasizes that SoTL inquiry meets the same standards as other more traditional scholarships. Our points of connection with Boyer emerge from our Faculty's use of Boyer's four scholarships in our working definition of what constitutes "Scholarly Research and Creative" (SRC) activity. In addition, we felt it important to recognize, in the final sentence, the multiple benefits and impacts for students, faculty and university that emerge from SoTL engagement.

In the process of articulating a working definition for our SoTL activities, our Centre's Associates routinely asked the question: "isn't SoTL just a fancy name for educational research?" Our reconnaissance here suggested that others who engage in SoTL also face this challenge in differentiating their efforts from educational researchers. In the end, we resolved to limit our definition to one that positioned SoTL efforts in the context of the educational mandate of our faculty; recognized the importance of non-faculty participants in SoTL activities at Ryerson; and reinforced the legitimacy of SoTL activities in the context of other scholarly activities. This exercise of articulating a working definition was both a pro-active and reactive exercise. By reaching a point where we were able to specifically position our work, our Centre now has a collective understanding of our SoTL work and, as such, has positioned us to move forward into new activities. Our definition is, in some regards a reactive statement to what has historically been a situation where SoTL has remained less visible in the academy. This historical precedent could explain why some faculty members are reluctant to engage with SoTL. However, while our Centre Associates were focusing on defining our work, change was afoot across our Campus and with these changes came a new opportunity to position our work strategically. In the section that follows, this watershed moment is defined.

The Watershed Moment

With Ryerson's evolution from a polytechnic institution to its current status as a university with rapidly expanding graduate programmes and an increased emphasis on peer-reviewed research output and grant success comes a shift in academic priorities. At Ryerson, these priorities are articulated in the form of an academic plan authored by the university's Provost. The university's current academic plan, *Shaping Our Future: Academic Plan for 2008-2013*, is noteworthy for its dual imperatives of setting ambitious targets for research outputs and for its formal attention, for the first time in Ryerson's history, to the scholarship of teaching and learning. The chart (Figure 1) provides an overview of SoTL related excerpts from the Plan as a means of providing context for our Centre's future work and for the discussion and reflection included in this paper.

Figure 1 SoTL related excerpts from Ryerson's Academic Plan for 2008-2013

SoTL-related Excerpts from the Ryerson Academic Plan (2008)

Priorities: The Academic Plan has five strategic priorities. It is noteworthy that “learning and teaching excellence appears as a separate category in this plan in order to emphasize our commitment to fostering a rich environment that makes opportunities for students and professors alike to experiment with ideas and to experience intellectual and professional growth (p. 8).”

The third priority is “Learning and teaching excellence” (p. 8). According to the Plan: “Ryerson prides itself on the high quality of the teaching and learning environment that it provides, and it will be important to preserve our commitment to that, even as research intensity increases. It will be important to seek out new synergies between teaching and research [...]. Ryerson will support new and innovative teaching strategies, experiments, and initiatives, including growth in the use of instructional technology” (p. 8).

Research Activity Areas:

“Through a strategic exercise carried out by the Vice President, Research and Innovation (VPRI) in conjunction with this Academic Plan, seven areas of research activity have been identified as carrying special opportunities. These are:

- digital media, communication, and information technology
- energy, sustainability, and the environment
- health and well being
- cultural prosperity
- technological innovation
- management, competitiveness, and entrepreneurship and
- learning and teaching effectiveness” (p. 9)

“Ryerson also recognizes that not all scholarly, research, and creative activity is tied to external research funding, and that other types of scholarship and creative activity are also recognized and valued. Mechanisms for this recognition will be established and will continue to evolve on criteria of quantity and quality. This includes the growing trend to recognize the scholarship of teaching and learning” (p. 15).

“All who are engaged in the teaching process—full and part-time faculty and instructors, new and experienced faculty and instructors, and the growing body of TAs and GAs—have a contribution to make to the quality of the educational experience of students, and as such have a professional responsibility to continue to reflect on and improve teaching and learning practices. Thus, it is essential to offer all those who teach the opportunity to learn and improve their teaching. Strategy 19: Opportunities will be enhanced for faculty, instructors, and teaching and graduate assistants to strengthen their teaching practices” (p. 22)

Shaping Our Future: Academic Plan for 2008-2013, Office of the Provost and Vice President Academic, June 2008

Having reviewed this document and considered its potential impact on our Centre's intention to expand faculty members' participation in SoTL activities, Centre Associates brainstormed what a SoTL-embracing Faculty of Community Services at Ryerson might look like. In this discussion, much emphasis was placed on the need for SoTL activities to be recognized as research activity in addition to teaching activity and for SoTL activities to be duly and appropriately considered in Ryerson's tenure and promotion processes. In light of our experiences thus far and the potential watershed opportunity that lies ahead, we sought to consider what lessons might we learn from other SoTL practitioners as we seek to entrench SoTL in the culture of FCS at Ryerson. In the discussion that follows, we focus our attention on the two most significant challenges that confront efforts to increase faculty participation in SoTL activity, expand recognition of SoTL's importance and meaningfully recognize SoTL activities as part of the tenure and promotion process in our Faculty.

Recognition of SoTL activities as legitimate scholarship

Often marginalized from 'true' scholarship in the eyes of institutional or disciplinary peers, SoTL work may not evoke the same respect or carry the same weight as traditional scholarship (Schroeder as cited in Boshier, 2009, p. 1).

Anecdotally, Centre Associates have, on occasion, encountered commentary from colleagues and academic leadership that implicitly or explicitly suggests that SoTL activities are not real and/or are inferior to more scholarly activities. In order to move SoTL forward at Ryerson, our Centre must find ways to reposition colleagues' and administration's perspective that SoTL is a legitimate SRC activity.

SoTL scholars offer a range of perspectives that diagnose the foundations of these misperceptions. First, it is challenging for SoTL to be recognized when there are no firm or agreed upon definitions of what constitutes SoTL (Hutchings & Shulman, 1999; Meyers, 2008; Shapiro 2006) or when SoTL is used as a synonym for too wide a range of activities (Boshier, 2009). Boshier (2009) also suggests that the ubiquitous reliance on Boyer's definition (1990) is "conceptually confusing" (p. 2). This makes intuitive sense: how can an activity be considered legitimate when there is no common ground upon which to evaluate the legitimacy? Or, when SoTL is used to describe everything from good teaching practice to peer-reviewed educational research, it makes it difficult for the uninitiated-SoTL discussant to understand what SoTL is and what it is not.

Second, Shapiro (2006) notes that SoTL is often equated with teaching rather than research, so SoTL-related research is automatically given less credibility than traditional research. Furthermore, Shapiro (2006) also notes that the range of activities on which SoTL projects focus (e.g., service learning or the creation of a learning community) are considered to be part of the faculty members' service requirements and, as such, rank lower in legitimacy than research and teaching. These misperceptions further entrench very real barriers to advancing SoTL recognition and legitimacy.

Recognition of SoTL activities in tenure and promotion processes

When hired at Ryerson, as dictated by the collective agreement of the Ryerson Faculty Association, faculty members are expected to engage in a combination of teaching, research and service activities. In the past, faculty members have had some

ability, when seeking tenure and promotion, to place more emphasis on the ratios of teaching to research to service but this option no longer exists due to changes in our Faculty Association Collective Agreement (source: Ryerson Faculty Association wiki). When seeking tenure and promotion, faculty assemble and rationalize their work based on contributions to teaching, research and service in discreet or siloed categories. Our Center, from the outset, recognized the challenge that lies ahead for faculty engaged in SoTL, an activity that by its very conceptualization seeks to transcend these silos rather than reinforce them.

One part of the recognition challenge we have identified is that there is an implicit belief amongst faculty members that while tenure will not be granted to those who fail to demonstrate competence in teaching, it is harder to achieve tenure based on evidence of excellent teaching as the predominant activity. And, as was earlier discussed, implicitly SoTL is often placed in the category of teaching rather than research by inference; it would be very challenging to achieve tenure based on vibrant SoTL activities unless these included significant output of traditional scholarly activities (e.g., peer reviewed journal papers). This scenario presents a systemic challenge in the tenure and promotion process: although candidates must demonstrate competencies in all three areas, it is research that dominates the decision-making process (Walker et al., 2006, p.183). Shapiro (2006) is clear here that SoTL is not as highly regarded as traditional research in the tenure and promotion process.

Another barrier faced when seeking to gain appropriate recognition for SoTL activities is that academic leadership lacks the tools and methods it needs to assess SoTL activities. For example,

on many campuses faculty are struggling to find ways to evaluate teaching and learning scholarship that aren't based on the sort of bean counting we have become accustomed to in evaluating disciplinary research. Yet, to a great extent, the culture at research universities has been resistant to this change. (Shapiro, 2006, p.42)

For SoTL communities seeking to gain acceptance and recognition of activities in tenure and promotion processes, this absence of effective evaluation mechanisms is problematic. First, it presents a conundrum: the only way we currently can make SoTL "count" is to count SoTL activities in a manner that is fundamentally contrary to the spirit and breadth of SoTL activities. And second, it is strategically challenging to advocate for change in a decision-making process that leads to broadening the parameters of consideration when there is no obvious series of alternatives to be advanced.

It is common, in the path to tenure, for faculty to be encouraged to develop an area of expertise in one particular area of their field of discipline. When faculty deviate from this norm, the general perception is that the case for tenure is harder to make. This phenomenon is well documented in the literature around interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research. For faculty with this disciplinary expertise who seek to engage in SoTL practice, it is easy to relegate SoTL activity to the add-on category (Shapiro, 2006, p. 42). More specifically,

Tenure track faculty are still mentored, cajoled, counseled, and even stiff armed to use the precious pre-tenure period to become competent teachers, while

making sure their primary focus is on establishing excellence through a funded research program within their disciplines. (Shapiro, 2006, p.42)

If this *tenure-first*, SoTL *later* attitude exists, it has the potential for entire cohorts of new faculty to miss the window in which to build SoTL into the foundation of their academic life, and, as such, it presents a tremendous missed opportunity.

Acknowledging Barriers but Forging Ahead Strategically

With the recognition that our Centre faces the related challenges of increasing the recognition of SoTL activities as a legitimate area of scholarship in support of tenure and promotion beyond the 'good teaching' requirements comes new challenging opportunities. In light of Ryerson's stated commitments to increasing its reputation as a research institution, teaching excellence, SoTL and improved student engagement, success for our Centre (FCS-CASTL), will come when we find a way to forge the perceived and realized linkages between engagement in SoTL and these commitments and/or priorities. When we consider the challenges we face in the context of the institutional priorities Ryerson has established, responding to two meaningful questions will help advance our work.

First, can it be demonstrated that participation in SoTL strengthens the capacity of faculty members (especially those who are pre-tenure) to engage in the scholarships of discovery, integration, teaching and application (Boyer, 1990)? In light of our own experiences, reinforced through our engagement with SoTL, SoTL either counts less, counts as something else, or doesn't count at all. Thus, strategically being able to demonstrate a link between SoTL and other forms of scholarship strengthens the potential to harness support for SoTL.

Second, can it be demonstrated that the initiation and completion of SoTL activities lead to meaningful opportunities for student engagement and learning? As with the first question, by being able to demonstrate the co-benefits of SoTL activities, the potential to harness new resources for SoTL activities expands in light of the University's increased emphasis on student engagement.

In response to the first question, some have offered guidance with regard to how to assist faculty in making the transition from an interest in good teaching to SoTL research (see Figure 2). This approach suggests that an interest in SoTL may need some nurturing, mentoring and guidance from experienced SoTL scholars to move a faculty member from being simply an interested by-stander to becoming an active participant in SoTL. However, these prompting questions end with the classroom as the final destination when SoTL practice may have impact and resonance beyond learning in one particular context. The absence of research linking SoTL practice to broader inquiry success suggests that the SoTL community might consider a new area of inquiry and measurement.

Figure 2 Questions to help faculty develop scholarship of teaching and learning projects

Questions to Help Faculty Develop Scholarship of Teaching & Learning Projects

1. Important goals: What can students do after completing the program (course, activity)?
2. How do students learn to do this?
3. What information or evidence is there that students are learning this?
4. How has this information been used to help students learn?
5. What additional evidence is needed to understand how well students are learning this?
6. What possible new or improved assessment tools or techniques might be used?

Note. Questions from Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2007, p. 91).

(from Smith, 2008, p. 265)

In response to the second question, the work of Brew and Ginns (2008) is instructive. In their evaluation of the University of Sydney's investments in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, they found that there was a significant relationship, at the faculty level, between engaging in SoTL, and changes in the way students experienced their courses. Their work provides empirical support for what seems intuitive: SoTL should benefit students. It seems probable that students should learn better in a classroom environment supported by a faculty member who engages in SoTL to inform his/her pedagogy and their learning (Smith, 2008). Again, we suggest this is a fertile area of further inquiry.

As we note in our Centre's working definition, SoTL practice begins with a learning-related question emerging from faculty, students or community practitioners, which then leads to some form of inquiry. Generally speaking, this inquiry is intended to advance the particular learning outcomes within a specific learning environment (e.g. a course, a professional curriculum). However, given our University's growing and broad-based interest in student-engagement writ large, perhaps SoTL practitioners need to expand the scale at which impact is assessed beyond their own specific context to the broader student engagement context as a means of building broader based support for SoTL activities.

Conclusions:

In this paper, we have described how the evolution of the mandate of our university presents a watershed moment for critical change in the context of building an institutional climate in which SoTL can thrive. In particular, this watershed moment signals the need for our Centre to invest time, energy and further attention to the following issues that may either serve as barriers or opportunities to a thriving SoTL culture in our specific institution. The first challenge is related to the negative impact on SoTL that is created when teaching, research, and service are placed in silos. At Ryerson, our current collective agreement (and many that have preceded it) requires that faculty who are being considered for tenure and promotion must account for their contributions in the discrete categories of teaching, research and service. Annual faculty report templates contain the same seemingly mutually exclusive categories, which present a significant problem. First, as identified by Shapiro (2006), SoTL appears to be

considered more often as part of teaching than research. When this association occurs in a university with the threefold silos, the recognition of SoTL is minimized, thus effectively serving as a disincentive for pre-tenure faculty to invest significantly in other scholarly activities beyond those for which they were trained through their doctoral studies.

As our efforts to position the importance of SoTL in the University's mandate have unfolded, we have encountered challenges in explaining why SoTL activities that do not end with the publication of a peer-reviewed journal paper 'count' as scholarly activity. From our research, it appears that we are not alone in facing this challenge (Shapiro, 2006; Walker et. al, 2006). Until we can find new ways to 'count' SoTL activities with a method that is not antithetical to the spirit and intention of the range of scholarships that SoTL encompasses, while still presenting SoTL as a "legitimate" form of scholarly activity beyond good teaching, then SoTL will remain a misunderstood, underappreciated and less-practiced scholarly option for faculty. A further risk should SoTL not thrive in our university is that our students will not benefit from innovative and meaningful learning opportunities/experiences that emerge from active engagement in the SoTL. (Brew & Ginns, 2008; Smith, 2008).

Finally, while not explored in detail in this paper, many of the SoTL scholars whose work informed this article flagged concerns with SoTL reliance on Boyer's definition (1999). This concern signals the need for a meaningful consideration of the use of Boyer in our faculty's scholarly research and creative activity definition. For many in our faculty, Boyer's work provided the space for a wider range of scholarly activities and outputs beyond peer-reviewed journal papers and, as such, contributed to the administration formally recognizing and counting SoTL activities as part of the research silo as well as part of the teaching one. Yet, we have learned others feel Boyer's approach creates confusion about what SoTL really is and perhaps serves as a barrier to more robust recognition of the importance of SoTL activities. Moving forward, it is also possible that any suggestion that Boyer needs to be revisited could result in a new SRC definition that would be less inclusive rather than SoTL supporting. This conundrum warrants much deliberation.

The watershed moment at which the Ryerson Faculty of Community Services Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning finds itself presents tremendous opportunities for critical change. Yet, as our Centre associates began to consider the challenges that lay ahead in the context of the experiences of other SoTL practitioners, it appears that in our efforts to seize these opportunities we may encounter significant and wide-spread challenges. However, our capacity to address these challenges is expanded in part because, despite these challenges, other SoTL practitioners have continued and/or persisted, perhaps in spite of encountering similar challenges. With this in mind, we begin our next phase of action and will, in the spirit of repayment, engage in SoTL practice so that our watershed moment might inform the work of others facing similar circumstances.

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