

Building Scholarly Communities: Lessons Learned

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Abstract:

This is a synthesis article of the experience of six post-secondary institutions, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Queen's University, Ryerson University, Southeast Missouri State University, University of Glasgow, and The Ohio State University (the

coordinating institution) that were brought together by the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) under the Institutional Leadership initiative entitled Building Scholarly Communities. Over a four year period, these institutions, through the leadership of key individuals and with the support of teaching and learning centres at their institutions, worked to create a culture where the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) would be seen to be as important as the scholarship of discovery (research). In this synthesis article, common themes and unique experiences are identified based on the stories of the individual institutions. As well, challenges and lessons learned are described.

Key Words:

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

Introduction

Although the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching published Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered* in 1990, the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning (SoTL) has not gained parity with other academic work. It is still seen as the "other," that which is not as valued as the scholarship of discovery (research) (Gurm, 2009). To enhance the profile of SoTL, six post-secondary institutions engaged in key institutional initiatives. Gallos (2006) states it is imperative to create a culture where educators feel supported in engaging in SoTL. This was the purpose of this CASTL group: to build scholarly communities thereby creating a culture where SoTL is clearly valued. Group members agreed that they did not want to reinvent the wheel and so set a goal of learning from each other. To accomplish this goal, institutions shared their initiatives over the four year course of the CASTL project. These initiatives are described in the preceding papers. The history and definitions of SoTL and learning communities are also provided in the first article of this issue and so are not described here.

To formally complete the project, members of the CASTL group met at Kwantlen Polytechnic University and reviewed each institution's description of initiatives. This peer review process provided each institution with feedback and also allowed for a thematic analysis. The themes were used to create an outline for this paper. More specifically, in this synthesis paper we describe the successes, shared and unique, among the institutions of higher education. Indeed, while sharing our experiences, the group was impressed by the amount of activity that occurred to create a culture of SoTL at each institution. But what also became apparent during the discussion were the incredible challenges and the reality faced on the ground. For example, we all struggled with the definition of SoTL and how the definition was relevant to each of our universities. Ensuring adequate resources, both institutional and personnel, as well as concern over institutional commitment were issues faced by all institutions in the cluster. However, although there were challenges, as a community, we also identified strategies for maintaining momentum. These strategies are provided towards the end of the article as well as insights into the lessons the CASTL group learned. Although each institution has a slightly different interpretation of SoTL, we all agree on the importance of continuing to engage in the larger discussion of elevating the value of learning and teaching.

Summaries of Institutional Initiatives

Although the common goal for all cluster members was to create a culture where SoTL was supported and valued, there was diversity in activities each institution undertook. These initiatives are highlighted here. For specific details, the reader is invited to review the previous essays in this issue.

[Queen's University](#)

- Focus on Foundations Certificate
- University Chair in Teaching and Learning
- Charles Baillie Teaching Award
- Teacher's Writing Circles
- Meet the teacher series and Cross faculty teaching forum
- Research study examining the potential for academic advancement through SoTL

[Ryerson University](#)

- Creation of a SoTL unit at the Faculty level
- Creating a common definition of SoTL
- Building on an Institutional-wide initiative
- Recognizing SoTL as "research"
- Organizing an Educator retreat

[Glasgow University](#)

- Creating a Teaching and learning strategy
- Establishing Associate deans of learning and teaching in each faculty
- Creating a new career track "University Teacher"
- Establishing a Learning and Teaching Centre

[The Ohio State University](#)

- Establishing the Ohio State Association for the Scholarship of Teaching (TOAST)
- Organizing Quarterly seminars
- Hosting Regular Meetings
- Organizing Workshops

[Southeast Missouri State University](#)

- Creating a Teacher-Scholar Model
- Establishing a SoTL Fellows Program
- Recognizing the Center for its active role in SoTL
- Establishing SOTL program grants

[Kwantlen Polytechnic University](#)

- Publishing a Teaching and Learning journal Web journal, *Transformative Dialogues*: three times per year
- Creating a faculty Teaching for Learning program
- Creating Reading Circles

- Fostering Peer Mentoring Alliances
- Hosting brown bag lunch series to share scholarly work
- Sponsoring Annual Symposia and Conferences
- Creating an electronic repository for scholarly artifacts
- Integrating SoTL into the Collective Agreement

In addition to this list of projects, the review revealed activities that were unique to individual institutions. These are highlighted as follows.

In the United Kingdom, everyone teaching at the university must have a post-doctorate teaching diploma. Creating such a diploma forms a centerpiece of Glasgow University's (the oldest university in the group) SoTL strategy. Tuition for the first year of this diploma is fully paid for by Glasgow University. As well, Glasgow has created a teaching career track position called the University Teacher. Individuals in these positions obtain promotion through accomplishments in SoTL as opposed to traditional disciplinary based research activities.

The need to identify a specific career pathway supporting SoTL resonates with the findings of the research study undertaken at Queen's University. Indeed, in their interviews of department heads, it was found that, although many were supportive of SoTL, academic promotion through SoTL was not well understood or supported. Another unique feature of Queen's University (the most research intensive Canadian university in the group), is their creation of the Teaching and Learning Centre, which was funded through a students' endowment and ongoing funding through student fees.

Returning to the theme of academic advancement through SoTL, Ryerson University acknowledged that, in the past, the prime factor in tenure has been discipline-based research. Only once tenure was achieved could an individual consider the possibility of engaging in SoTL. The phrase "Tenure first; SoTL later" captures this dynamic. In general, this dynamic is the norm across universities and limits the recognition that SoTL can have a significant role to play in scholarly activity. With SoTL embedded in the Academic Plan of the university, the importance of making the connection between SoTL and student learning (the stated goal of every post-secondary institution) is also identified by Ryerson University. More specifically, the university recognizes the importance of institutional leadership in creating and sustaining momentum.

The need for changes in institutional organization and leadership as a way of legitimizing SoTL is also featured in the description of initiatives provided by Kwantlen Polytechnic University. As well, the extensive reliance on volunteers at Kwantlen Polytechnic University (the youngest university in the group) to support SoTL is noteworthy. The centre itself is minimally staffed with a .75 teaching position and .6 clerical position. A culture of service is created through the use of a number of educator volunteers. Although this is admirable, there is real fear that those volunteering to work on the centre's initiatives may burn out in the long term.

In contrast, Southeast Missouri State University has been able to secure funding for its Fellows Program by demonstrating its success and value. A key indicator of success used is the feedback that educators are integrating key elements of the projects into their classes and other educators are adapting these methods in classes they teach. The cluster members are also taking deliberate strides to expand its centre. As well,

Southeast Missouri State University cluster members have created community by hosting a website for our CASTL cluster.

A unique feature of The Ohio State University (the largest American university) is the use of business language to understand and advance SoTL. At Ohio State, the creation of SoTL communities is viewed as social capital. Whilst not all members of the CASTL cluster of Building Scholarly Communities agree with the notion of SoTL capital, the Ohio State University "[2 x 2 model](#)", we do agree that the model provides a useful theoretical framework. It highlights the importance of both disciplinary and institutional community, and linkages to other external forms of community.

In reviewing these initiatives, it became apparent to us that much progress has been made towards building scholarly communities and creating a supportive SoTL culture at the level of individual institutions. What also emerged during discussions were commonalities and differences among institutions with respect to their experience in being involved in the CASTL project or as part of a larger global community interested in advancing SoTL. These themes are offered in the following section.

Acting as Catalysts and Leaders for Change

We all had varying experiences about the benefits of belonging to CASTL. In North America, the Carnegie name is well recognized so the North American institutions received value through association. In the United Kingdom, however, the Carnegie name has limited recognition, so the benefit of belonging to the CASTL project was not clear. We all agreed, however, that regardless of the Carnegie association there was benefit in participating as a member of a community (CASTL group) with similar interests and goals. Most importantly, we all benefited from interacting with a group of like-minded individuals working to promote what may be a fairly new concept across some institutions. We all saw ourselves as catalysts for change and profited from the synergy within our CASTL community for both developing new ideas and overcoming challenges.

Providing leadership for change is one aspect of acting as a catalyst. Leadership was demonstrated during at least two distinct time periods over the course of this project; first, during the initial move to join the Carnegie community and, second, during the life of the project where the challenge was to maintain the cluster partnership and the momentum at each of our institutions. During the early stages of initiation, key leaders at some of our institutions recognized the potential benefits of participating in the Carnegie initiative. Furthermore, in some cases, the timing of the partnership coincided with parallel developments regarding student learning, the visions and missions of the universities, and respective Academic Plans. In these early stages, we, as participants in the project, also played the role of leaders by liaising with those in key leadership positions in order to gain support for participation in the project.

After the cluster was initiated and we met in Washington, DC, for the very first time in the fall of 2006, we coalesced around our convening institution, The Ohio State University, and the Director, Center for Teaching and Learning, Alan Kalish. From that point on, the institution hosting the meeting assumed leadership. Our leadership was truly emergent as was our plan of approach. The phrase of "building the bridge as we

walked on it” (Quinn, 2004) seemed to best represent the evolution of our activities. Leadership continues to sustain our cluster, where those at each institution continue to advocate for our continued activities.

As we reviewed the history of our cluster, it became apparent to us that, in groups, leadership emerges and changes through different group stages (Tuckman, 1965). As well, leaders can emerge in different parts of the organization to implement change (Wheatley, 1999). We acknowledge that leadership may exist in formal contexts through administrative positions conferred by the institutions (top-down) and informal contexts by virtue of individuals or groups upholding a strong belief in SoTL and desiring to move a SoTL-agenda forward as agents of influence (down-up). For us, acknowledging these different levels and types of leadership played an important role in the success of our CASTL project.

From the initial forming stage to the current performing stage, our CASTL group has worked well together. From our initial meetings of ‘why do we want to work together?’ and our agony of trying to come up with a single definition of SoTL that fit all of our contexts, we have moved to a place of mutual respect for diversity and celebration of our successes while sharing the challenges of our groups and respective institutional realities.

Challenges

Despite these shared and unique successes, the cluster faced two key challenges. The first challenge involved the ongoing debate regarding the definition of SoTL. The second challenge had to do with how we communicated both as a group and at our respective institutions. It should be noted however, that throughout the project we continued to agree on the common goal of enhancing the value of SoTL by building scholarly communities. It soon became apparent that the challenges reflect our different campus contexts and therefore, at times, diverse perspectives on how to go about achieving our common goal. Interestingly, the group agreed that rather than being divisive, these challenges provided us with the opportunity to engage in rich conversations.

Defining SoTL

As described in the introductory article, one of the first goals we set was to create a common definition of SoTL. Given our unique contexts, we soon found that this was extremely difficult and, in fact, almost three years later, we continue to debate the qualities of SoTL. Issues such as whether or not SoTL includes educational research or what constitutes “going public” with SoTL work frame the nature of the debate. However, a common theme that emerged from our discussion was the importance of engaging in this discussion at the institutional level. We agreed that it was more important to have a common approach across an institution than within our CASTL cluster. Even so, defining SoTL at the institutional level has also proven to be more difficult than we first anticipated. Regardless of whether a definition is ever agreed upon, the process of having this discussion has been beneficial in building community and increasing understanding amongst individuals and institutions. Indeed, by having the

conversation, we have discovered some shared ground at the cluster and our own institutions. We can agree that

- the ultimate goal of SoTL is to improve student learning,
- SoTL requires that we make our work public so as to build and share the body of work/understanding,
- Non-traditional forms of publication should be considered valued venues for making SoTL public (e.g., peer-reviewed electronic repositories, newspaper articles etc)

We also agreed that there is an intrinsic value to the scholar in doing this work regardless of whether it is valued by external bodies.

Communications

In spite of modern technology, different geographical time zones and varying access to technology posed a challenge for the group to stay connected in between our annual face-to-face meetings. Creating this connection was critical to our formation as a community. Consequently, it took us perhaps longer than usual to go through the classic model of stages in group development (forming, storming, norming, performing – Tuckman, 1965). In fact, it was nearly a year to a year and a half into the three-year project before the norming and performing stages ensued. The difficulty in group formation was hampered by the fact that financial constraints made face-to-face meetings difficult to arrange for all members. The shift in personnel and, ultimately, the withdrawal of one of our institutional members, as described in the opening article, also had an impact on our ability to communicate effectively. Regardless of institutional size, communicating our goals within our respective institutions was also difficult. Not only did some of our institutions not really understand the purpose of the Carnegie connection, but, more importantly, they failed to grasp the potential of SoTL for the enhancement of student learning. This was particularly evident in cultures where promotion, tenure, and other rewards stemmed from success in the scholarship of traditional disciplinary research initiatives.

Lesson Learned

And so, given these challenges, the one question that remains is how do we sustain momentum with respect to advancing SoTL in light of limited, and, in some cases, shrinking resources? In this section we present a number of strategies that emerged as we reviewed the individual institutional initiatives.

Fostering Sustainability

To keep this movement going, to create a culture of SoTL, we need to build on the idea of social capital as described in the 2X2 model discussed in an earlier paper. We need to engage with the broader community. We need to penetrate each department and create groups interested in SoTL. These groups need to connect with other department groups to create community across the institution and, finally, they need to connect with other institutions to create a global community. In this fashion, we can create synergy and possibly use fewer resources as ideas are shared. We need to work together and get away from the older paradigms of isolation and ‘ivory towers,;’ we need

to give way to institutions of learning becoming 'learning institutions' themselves. Learning institutions work together and globalize their knowledge and then try to localize it to their context. This process has been termed "glocalization" and is a key facet of the globalization of knowledge (Spybey, 1996). Glocalization, particularly where a merging of global opportunities and local interests occurs, is at the heart of engaging in SoTL as well as expanding and sharing it across disciplinary, institutional, and national boundaries.

Enhance Communication

Communication is an important vehicle for maintaining momentum. We need to be able to highlight projects and create opportunities for colleagues to work together. The educators at Kwantlen Polytechnic University sighted the opportunity to dialogue with colleagues as the key driver for participation. Also, as projects are highlighted (in newsletters, web pages, events) and valued; more colleagues will come forward. This may be done through, conferences, brown bag lunches, and hallway conversations (see activities used by different institutions in the other articles in this issue). As well, we may be able to set up learning hubs or mini learning communities strategically at our own institutions.

Engage the Larger Academic Community

In today's climate, no matter how many resources we may be able to secure, they will not be enough to do all the work required to create a global SoTL culture. We will need to rely on volunteers who are enthusiastic and eager to pursue this work. We can support these volunteers with resources such as communication networks and current literature and thoughts. We can work with the volunteers to highlight their work and promote it as scholarship. Lastly, we can work on recruiting a large pool of volunteers so that the few do not get burned out. As well, we should learn from Southeast Missouri State University and use our successes as leverage to obtain more funding and offer programs such as the SoTL Fellows for those who are enthusiastic about SoTL. Also, if the focus is placed on teaching when young teaching assistants are hired, this may provide us with a future pool of SoTL scholars. An example of this is the graduate student training offered at Queen's University. This may encourage younger faculty to engage in SoTL early on in their careers. Another lesson that can be taken from the Queen's University example is the importance of engaging students as part of the SoTL movement. There, undergraduate students voted to create an endowment to create a centre for teaching and learning. The students voted for a student fee levy because of the importance they attach to student learning. One way to encourage this type of participation may be to start by inviting with invited students to participate in SoTL and develop SoTL policies. This may be appropriate as assignments in some undergraduate courses.

Integrating SoTL into Academic Planning

All institutions develop academic plans. We all need to work together to ensure that the values of SoTL are well embedded in these plans through mission statements, values, or policies. Many institutions have moved from merely providing lip service to learning and teaching to more explicit concrete expectations. Institutional/SoTL activists need to engage in these policies so they are not flawed, unrealistic or ignored by faculty

and departmental level decision makers. Institutional value statements can become a list of good intentions that no one would disagree with, but the danger is that they are ignored or are too ethereal or become mandated key performance indicators that are over-managed, and thus stifle creativity and engagement of educators. If expectations of quality teaching that enhances student learning are formalised in institutionally documented mission statements, they can be used as leverage for resources and actions. Examples are Kwantlen Polytechnic University's declared set of values and language in the Kwantlen Faculty Association's collective agreement, Ryerson University's new academic plan, and Glasgow University's requirement of a post-doctorate certificate in teaching for all university educators. Institutions have moved from merely providing lip service to learning and teaching. Now more expectations have become explicit and more concrete. We need to work with tenure and promotion committees to ensure equal pathways for SoTL work are the same as those for and not just the scholarship of discovery.

Navigating through unintended consequences

As a result of this work, we also discussed the possibility of creating unintended consequences. So we invite readers to be aware of the nature of these events, for and as SoTL communities continue to develop, awareness of these consequences may be informative.

Institutionalizing SoTL

In an age of accountability, it is possible for SoTL to be used as a required measure of teaching performance. Administrators may deem this part of "good teaching practice" and add it to our teaching responsibilities (i.e., to be a good teacher, you must engage in SoTL). This may foster and reinforce the gap between research and teaching and, ultimately contribute to the devaluation of teaching as an important academic activity. This may also narrow the range of activities considered to count for SoTL. Engaging in SoTL may therefore not be as creative or motivating as would be possible (processes that become embedded tend to lead us to just do the minimum).

SoTL becomes the purview of an exclusive group

There needs to be recognition of the tension that exists between wanting to grow the community and wanting to have those engaged in SoTL bringing specific expertise and standards to the field. We ask ourselves: Is access restricted to specific groups of practitioners engaging in SoTL? Do we want to appear united and cohesive at the cost of staying small? If yes, will we lose the opportunity to grow and peruse SoTL as widely as possible? There are also inherent risks in growing large too quickly. Since this is uncharted territory, we are not sure if our path is correct. As well, it may be hard to let go of something we created (ownership), and struggle with diverse perspectives as we change and grow and have real concerns that others may not have the same understanding of and enthusiasm for SoTL. Part of the solution could be to build faculty reward structures specific to advancing SoTL. Currently, teaching can take a backseat for those who wish to focus on disciplinary scholarship. This contributes to a culture which does not value SoTL. If these systems were changed and pre-tenure faculty engaged in SoTL, new venues for support could be identified.

Final Thoughts

As we reached the end of our analysis, one final theme emerged. We realized that all of our institutions have a mandate to enhance student learning/engagement. Indeed, emphasizing the connection between SoTL and student learning was seen as a powerful lever for continuing to advance our work. One strategy, for example, may be to create a link between surveys on student learning and undertaking SoTL work. In the North American context, this could mean using the results of the National Survey of Student Engagement to garner attention and resources for SoTL.

Through coming together as a cluster, we have benefited from sharing and developing ideas (it truly has been synergistic), and implementing these ideas at our institutions. As we have shared our plans with our cluster, we have become a community and therefore feel more committed to acting as catalysts and leaders for change. It is now clear to us that communication is key to creating scholarly communities; time zones and resources need to be considered when connecting globally. In addition, the development of a theoretical model about social capital highlights the importance of providing different opportunities for making sense of SoTL as it applies to different situations and groups. It is also clear that engaging in SoTL must take into account diverse contexts and learners. These are the challenges that face us as we continue our rich dialogue on advancing SoTL. We look forward to welcoming all of you into this dialogue.

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