Developing a Cohort of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) Faculty in an Undergraduate Nursing Program: Discovering our *own* path

**Barbara J. Astle RN, PhD, Trinity Western University,
Maureen Mitchell RN, EdD, Darlene Dawson, RN, MN,
Genevieve Currie, RN, MN, Mohamed El Hussein, RN, MN,
Mount Royal University**

Authors' Contact Information

Barbara J. Astle RN, PhD, Assistant Professor
Trinity Western University
School of Nursing
7600 Glover Road
Langley, British Columbia, Canada V2Y 1Y1
Email: barbara.astle@twu.ca

Maureen Mitchell RN, EdD, Associate Professor
Darlene Dawson, RN, MN, Associate Professor
Genevieve Currie, RN, MN, Associate Professor
Mohamed El Hussein, RN, MN, Assistant Professor
Mount Royal University
School of Nursing, Faculty of Health and Community Studies
4825 Mount Royal Gate SW
Calgary, Alberta, Canada T3E 6K6

Abstract:

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is increasingly being implemented in various university contexts particularly for institutions where teaching and learning are a major focus. This paper describes the grassroots journey of a cohort of School of Nursing faculty who embarked on discovering the personal meaning of SoTL within a university transitioning from a college. This group met on a regular basis, and what emerged was the importance of exploring questions about student learning at a grassroots level, and disseminating how this process evolved resulting in a group presentation and the development of an Agraphia group. The paper concludes by suggesting that the formation of a SoTL group of nursing scholars may provide insight for creating a supportive research environment amenable to pursuing questions around one's teaching and learning and the importance for dissemination.

Key Words:

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), nursing, dissemination, grassroots.

Introduction

A recently founded School of Nursing (SoN) Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) initiative evolved at an academic institution that was transitioning from a college to a university. Accompanying the transition to university status was the underlying expectation of faculty engagement in scholarship, for example, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), and the dissemination of effective teaching and learning resources and strategies (Mount Royal University, 2009). In response to the College's Academic Plan (2007) to support scholarship with a focus on teaching and learning, an Institute of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning was created. The SoN administration was prepared to support individual faculty research programs, as well as a program of research in SoTL. To build capacity, the members of the SoTL initiative began their research with the intent of understanding their students' learning experiences and disseminating their process and outcomes. This paper describes the grassroots SoTL journey of a cohort of SoN faculty.

During the transition period, some colleagues within the SoN approached the Nursing Education Scholar wanting to know more about SoTL without becoming a Scholar in the Institutional SoTL Program (Mount Royal University, 2011). One colleague, for example, stated, "I want to enhance my learning, enhance my teaching and thus enhance better teaching and learning for the students" (D. Dawson, Personal Communication, December, 2010). Consequently, a formalized inquiry was made to faculty to determine interest in creating a cohort of SoTL scholars within the SoN, with the understanding that the Institutional SoTL support and stipend of the Scholar's Program would not apply (Mount Royal University, 2011). Initially, fifteen faculty expressed interest in the informal gathering to participate contingent upon the amount of time involved and scheduling. Ultimately, 6 faculty members were able to commit to the process and thus the first cohort of SoN SoTL Scholars was founded in January, 2010. One of the faculty members withdrew because of conflicting commitments.

The Nursing Education Scholar convened the first meeting with the six faculty members and the Director of the Institute for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and a member of the Scholar's Program. This meeting was pivotal in creating an environment of understanding of SoTL, specifically where the distinction between SoTL research from disciplinary and educational research was made. Following the initial meeting, the group met bi-monthly to begin development of individual research questions, proposal construction, access to continued support, and the opportunity to openly engage with each other about individual projects.

"The scholarship of teaching and learning invites faculty from all disciplines and fields to identify and explore interesting questions in their own teaching-and, especially, in their students' learning-and to share what they discover with colleagues who can build on their insights" (Huber & Hutchings, 2006, p. 25). Boyer (1990) was instrumental in bringing the concept of the scholarship of teaching to the foreground through his work with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. In Scholarship Reconsidered, Boyer suggested the scholarship of teaching be considered on the same level as the scholarship of discovery, of integration and of application as all four are interconnected with each other (p. 25). Other scholars posited a SoTL history through

the mid to late 20th century (Hutchings, 2000; Huber & Hutchings 2005; McKinney, 2007).

Huber and Hutchings (2005) suggested that the scholarship of teaching and learning should be a part of every faculty's repertoire, where the classroom is a place of inquiry into students' learning, with the intention to enhance their teaching. Gale (2008) argued that scaffolding and institutional support, with dedicated funding sources, mentoring opportunities, and dissemination vehicles, are required to build a culture of inquiry. Such a culture would create opportunities for asking questions, sharing results and celebrating the accomplishments of teaching and learning scholars (p. 49). The SoN initiative mimicked Gale's suggestions to build a culture of inquiry.

Huber and Hutchings (2005, 2006) identified the "teaching commons" as a space where individuals can engage in sharing ideas about teaching and learning. This notion of a "teaching commons" resonated with the SoN SoTL Scholars. Huber and Hutchings (2006) acknowledged the need to support more opportunities to dialogue about learning, informal working groups of faculty experimenting with particular pedagogies, and departmental conversations about critical learning issues (p. 30). Montgomery (2007) also suggested 'the commons' as an area for relaxed interactions, whereby conversations occur freely. Shulman (2000) stated that the work of SoTL cannot be done in isolation and recommended that the development of networks "serve as centers, support systems and sanctuaries for these kind of scholarly efforts" (p. 53). When reviewing the SoTL literature, little has been written about grassroots initiatives to explore questions of student learning, on the other hand, significant attention has been focused upon the development of faculty learning communities (Cox, 2004; Richlin & Cox, 2004; Andrew, Ferguson, Wilkie, Corcoran & Simpson, 2009; Maurer, Sturges, Shankar, Allen & Akbarova, 2010;Thompson, Galbraith & Pedro, 2010). The SoN SoTL Scholars took a grassroots initiative and created a faculty learning community.

What became evident, as the meetings progressed, was that there were a myriad of individual reasons for wanting to engage in the process, such as, belong to a SoTL community to acquire a more in-depth conceptual understanding of SoTL; gain confidence in another research perspective; participate in scholarship with opportunity and flexibility; and learn and share in a safe environment. Some of these reasons were clearly captured in the explicit narratives from the scholars.

One scholar, for example, described the importance for belonging to the SoTL community:

> To this point, in my career, I had been working in an academic context whereby research focused exclusively on my clinical interests. I was already very comfortable and possessed some expertise at conducting research in the more traditional sense; a trend followed by most established universities. The notion for placing student learning and faculty teaching first was a distinct shift and in contrast relative to the direction for my current research program. This mystifying world of SoTL intrigued me, so when I was invited to become a member of a cohort of SoTL nursing scholars, I decided to explore this new and unfamiliar opportunity. I wanted to become familiar with what SoTL research meant relative to the notion of providing a space for students to have a voice in the research

process in order to better understand my teaching and their learning. In addition, I was questioning how this type of scholarship of teaching and learning research could be juxtaposed, somehow, with my other more traditional research program (B. Astle, Personal Communication, December 2010).

Another scholar commented

I don't want to just stand in front of the students and not feel like I am actively engaging them in learning the subject being taught. I want to make my teaching meaningful and useful to the students as they go forward with their nursing practice. The question for me is to understand if applying educational theory is conducive to student learning (M. El Hussein, December 2010).

Some of the SoN SoTL scholars articulated that exploring different research perspectives, to enhance the teaching and learning activities within the context of the classroom, could facilitate the professor's confidence. As one scholar asserted:

Being a member of the SoN SoTL group allowed for another perspective to look at research that applied to how and what we do in the classroom, its effectiveness (or not) and how to see better sustained outcomes in learning for the students. Working with the SoN SoTL group also provided the opportunity to gain confidence within the research arena (D. Dawson, Personal Communication, December 2010).

Some of the SoN SoTL scholars commented that they viewed that being a part of this group provided opportunity and flexibility to participate in this type of scholarship. As one SoN SoTL scholar relayed:

The university already had a formalized Institute for SoTL which provided the overarching *institutional support* for our cohort. In addition, our cohort was not required to be a formalized member of the university SoTL scholars program. As a result, this arrangement was an appropriate *fit* for me based upon my current work relative to my other scholarly and service commitments. This opportunity provided a unique situation that I had not previously encountered (B. Astle, Personal Communication, December 2010).

Another SoN SoTL scholar stated:

I also needed flexibility and time to work away at this process at my own time since I am half time tenured and do not have a lot of leeway in my schedule (G. Currie, Personal Communication, December 2010).

There was an overall perception by the SoN SoTL scholars that this group provided a safe and supportive environment to share and learn together. As one scholar noted:

The SoN SoTL group offered me the opportunity to try vocalizing my question in a company of peers who understood my angst. A group of peers who would assist me with situating my research question within the context of our curriculum and theory. I also needed to make a commitment so that I would do something with my question and be held accountable to take it forward in a supportive environment. This has been a safe group to ask the questions and to learn

together. My participation in the nursing SoTL group has also been a powerful learning experience (G. Currie, Personal Communication, December 2010).

In agreement, another SoN SoTL scholar stated:

Having the support of the group ensured ongoing facilitation of the process to complete the research. Research that would be most applicable to the work commitment of the professor, motivation enhanced to continue to strive for better teaching methods, and improved satisfaction for students' learning (M. El Hussein, Personal Communication, December 2010).

Similarly, one SoN SoTL expressed how working with the group members provided a comforting environment:

The notion that a group of *non experts* in the underpinnings of SoTL could meet and have dialogue relative to our research areas and explore our tentative research questions in a non threatening environment was very appealing to me. This context of *comfort,* I think evolved primarily because we were all novices to this field of SoTL. Overtime, through our bi-monthly engagement as a cohort, we developed a level of understanding on an authentic relational level that was very collegial (B. Astle, Personal Communication, December 2010).

Group success begins in having common outcomes, both individually and collectively. Each member of the SoN SoTL scholars worked from a strengths perspective to achieve their goals (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). In addition, each group member had individual strengths that were pivotal to enhance the group's momentum. One member's strength was her organizational abilities. She was able to create a "teaching commons" stemming from the Huber and Hutchings (2006) concept, thus providing for the SoN SoTL scholars the framework, in terms of time and space. Another member's strength was experience around various research methodologies and publishing. When the group made the decision to begin presenting and writing about their experiences, this member was able to mentor the group about the process of dissemination and publishing as many in the group had never formally had these opportunities.

The ability to be the enthusiast was a strength valued by the scholars. Remaining curious and fostering continued endurance and positivity was the role of the enthusiast. The enthusiast promoted the sustenance of the group, and sometimes maintained sanity, in the continued pursuits of the group's goals and work toward their individual research projects. Being "open" was an important role that one member used to enhance the understanding, sharing, and reflecting. Being open to constructive feedback and different perspectives about learning experiences provided a comfortable context to move the projects forward.

Asking the right question is the starting point for a successful SoTL project. One group member thought they had the answer to their question even before designing the research project. Through the process of inquiry, however, there was continual dialogue and feedback amongst the group as they supported the development of the individual's research question.

The greatest challenge in initiating and maintaining the momentum for SoTL work was finding designated periods of time in the members' schedules to dialogue about their proposed SoTL research, conducting the study, and publishing. The scholars made a commitment to themselves and to the group to be available for the group activities, recognizing that flexibility, with cause, was acceptable. The scholars expanded on the notions articulated by Silva (2006) when discussing a writing community, where commitment to the process is vital to the success or production of the outcomes.

Another challenge was the lack of funding to support the SoN SoTL scholars' work, whereas funds were available for participants in the institutional SoTL Scholars Program. While the idea of having a SoN SoTL group was fully supported by the SoN Administration, they were unable to provide any substantial funding due to fiscal constraints. For the SoN group, however, intrinsic motivation compensated for the lack of funding support that was available to the institutional SoTL Scholars Program. The SoN administration is currently exploring funding possibilities.

As the SoN scholars were novice SoTL researchers, the mentorship provided by the Director of the Institute for Scholarship and Teaching was invaluable. The Director and an institutional SoTL scholar/mentor provided guidance and feedback on question development and research strategies. Their presence at the initial meetings set the stage for rich conversations about SoTL, and teaching and learning in general. It is anticipated that this support will change and decrease in the future as the Institutional Scholars Program becomes larger and requiring the Director's full attention. However, as all university faculty have an opportunity to join the Institutional Scholars' Program, it had been suggested that the SoN SoTL scholars join the institutional initiative. One member has chosen to join the Institutional Scholars Program, while the remaining scholars have chosen to continue with the SoN SoTL group.

The SoN SoTL Scholars came together, each with an idea they wanted to explore about their student's learning. Over the past year, each member developed their question, and developed plans to complete their study. As they move forward, each member of the SoN SoTL Scholars will submit their proposal for Human Ethics Review Board (HREB) approval with anticipated data collection, analysis and dissemination in the coming semesters. The passion for SoTL work was taken up in individual and unique ways by each member of the SoN SoTL group. One member, for example, stated he "was so inspired that I decided to follow this passion and join the Institutional Scholars Program. I have developed a question that will inform my practice while teaching "Adult health" (M. El Hussein, Personal Communication, January, 2011).

Dissemination of one's work is pivotal to the SoTL philosophy of making scholarship visible. Taking the challenging first step for dissemination, particularly publication, can be daunting to the novice SoTL scholar. The question for many becomes "How and where to begin?" Silva (2007) provided practical suggestions for the novice academic to develop a writing program. Goal setting and a writing support group were deemed useful for the novice academic writer. Based on his experience, Silva and his colleagues developed an "agraphia group –the pathologic loss of the ability to write- which nicely captured how most of us felt about writing" (p. 51) which captured how the SoN SoTL scholar also felt. Silva identified five components for a successful Agraphia

group as follows: 1) setting concrete, short/term goals and monitor the 'groups' progress 2) sticking to writing goals, not other professional goals, 3) big carrots can double as sticks 4) have different groups for faculty and students, and 5) optionally: drink coffee.

Another forum for dissemination is the conference venue. The SoN SoTL scholars presented their *grassroots* experience of SoTL at an international SoTL conference. The feedback from the conference participants inspired our group to write about our experience.

As our experience with SoTL moved into the second year, a call went out to faculty for interest in creating another SoTL group of scholars. Supporting and mentoring another group of interested SoTL scholars is a component in building capacity within the SoN for scholarship and research. Thus in 2011, a group of 4 scholars began their journey of SoTL scholarship.

The participation in the SoN SoTL program assisted the scholars in developing a deeper understanding of SoTL, classroom issues and researchable questions related to teaching and learning.

As one group member stated:

The nursing SoTL group has offered me connectedness to the larger field of nursing education and research. It has provided the opportunity for me to be part of a reflective community, with first hand experiential learning when asking the big teaching and learning questions and trying to determine my scholarship path. Finally it has provided me with inspiration to keep going and ask my questions or and make time for my scholarly pursuits around teaching and learning (G. Currie, Personal Communication, December 2010).

The SoN SoTL scholars shared their experiences so others may be inspired to take this journey – discovering their own path.

Table: Key Points "Our Path"

Champion	Individual in a position (i.e. Nursing Education Scholar or designated Faculty member) to identify faculty interest, and to facilitate and move the initiative forward.
Faculty	Interested, curious and motivated.
Space	Creating time "teaching commons" and places for regular scheduled meetings (Nursing Education Scholar, with support from the Nursing Administration, organized the time and arranged the physical space to meet).
Support	Initial mentorship provided by a member from the University Institute for Scholarship and Teaching to develop research questions and move SoTL projects forward, i.e., reading proposals, and preparation for Ethics Review.
Dissemination	Conference Presentation: Preparation prior to the conference and presenting provided a forum to strengthen the group bonds. Agraphia Group: the process of group writing enhanced individual skills through mentorship from within the group.
Challenges to Consider	Finding designated periods of time in the member's schedules to have dialogue about their proposed research, conducting the study, and publishing. Lack of funding to support the SoTL scholars' work. Dissemination of the scholars' work can be daunting to the novice SoTL scholar.

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