

## **SoTL Activities: Creativity and Choices**

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### **Abstract**

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is a discipline in itself. Students benefit from being taught by people who have a deeper and wider understanding of teaching and learning. In this article, I identify twelve interdependent and intermingling activities in which scholars of teaching and learning engage as well as comment on the body of knowledge about how the brain learns, the conditions ideal to learning, and the ways in which individuals learn is ever expanding. This is an exciting time for teachers and an opportune time for students.

### **1. Creativity and Choices**

I often find myself, as I drift off to sleep, contemplating the difficulties my students experience while they learn new skills. From time to time, I wake with a start charged with a new teaching idea to try in my adult literacy class. I also find myself, while showering or driving, off in space - a special, creative, reflective space - where I dream up new lesson plans and new approaches to teaching so that the students' learning will be meaningful and enduring. As I write my thoughts on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), I ask myself why I do this. Why do teachers spend time developing new ideas and new approaches to teaching? Some subjects, such as English and math, don't change all that much. Why don't we just do the same things our teachers did when we were learning to read and write?

The answers to this question begin to define the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). As scholars of teaching and learning, we are interested not only in our subject matter, in my case English literacy and upgrading, but also in how we teach and most importantly, how our students learn. Many of us can remember the brilliant professor who barely raised his head from his notes to look at the auditorium full of students during his lecture. He was an accomplished scholar of his discipline - perhaps chemistry, psychology, or art history - but not a scholar of teaching and learning. The chances are that he did not study the discipline of teaching and learning unless he was an education professor.

Now, the SoTL is a discipline in itself. Our students benefit from being taught by people who have a deeper and wider understanding of teaching and learning. As instructors, we are no longer limited to the lecture mode. We can create our own activities and chose from a range of teaching methods and the many available technologies that can make course content more stimulating and memorable. More and more, teachers are as equally engaged with the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning as they are with their disciplines. How they teach the subject matter is as important as the content. This is an exciting time for teachers and an opportune time for learners. Information on how the brain learns, the conditions ideal to learning and the ways in which individuals learn is ever expanding.

Lee Shulman (1999), President of the Carnegie Foundation of Teaching and Learning describes scholarship in his article "Taking Learning Seriously":

An act of intelligence or of artistic creation becomes scholarship when it possesses at least three attributes: it becomes public; it becomes an object of critical review and evaluation by members of one's community; and members of one's community begin to use, build upon, and develop those acts of mind and creation.

Since beginning work as an adult educator, I have striven to attain these attributes of scholarship and have found, in doing so, that I must engage in several interdependent and overlapping activities. Through the works of others and via my own experiences, I have discovered that scholars of teaching and learning involve themselves in twelve discernible activities: studying, teaching, creating, consulting, reflecting, exploring, assessing and evaluating, researching, recording, sharing, and inviting review and evaluation. Once the work is shared, it can, as Shulman notes, be used, built upon and further developed by others. Note that I don't call these activities "stages" or "steps", as they don't have a clear beginning and ending. They don't necessarily take place in the order in which I listed them, nor do they take place separately from one another. They overlap and intermingle to make way for a rich understanding and practice of teaching and learning.

The first activity of a scholar involves learning and studying. Scholars of teaching and learning begin as students. As scholars, we can enroll in workshops, certificates, diplomas, and degrees. During this time we have the opportunity to study and research others' ideas and findings. With our educators and peers, we explore and discuss others' and our own developing thoughts about teaching and learning. We engage in activities that help us build our knowledge and skills so that we, in turn, become educators. Of course, these learning activities don't end as we continue our lifelong learning through a wide range of professional development activities.

The second activity brings us into the classroom where we begin to practice what we have learned. Then, once we find our footing as teachers, we move into the third and fourth set of activities that involve reflection on our practice and the exploration of new possibilities. We ask such questions as "What am I doing in the classroom that works?", "What doesn't work?", "Is the physical environment conducive to learning?", and "What else can I do to enhance and advance my students' learning?"

The latter question invites us to be creative and expand upon what we already do in the classroom. With knowledge of the conditions under which learning takes place, we can employ any number of learning activities. We can lecture, show videos and PowerPoint presentations, ask our students to participate in cooperative learning activities, travel abroad with our class and provide work co-op opportunities. The possibilities are limitless. The focal question is, "what is best for my students?"

To find out if the students are indeed learning, we must measure their progress. Again, we have many choices as to the ways in which we will assess and evaluate our students. We chose from a number of different types of assessment such as written tests, oral presentations, demonstrations, and journals. In addition to measuring our students' learning, I feel strongly that we must also evaluate our teaching. Feedback

allows us to see our work through other peoples' eyes and gives us the opportunity to modify and improve what we do.

The work we do beyond the classroom is what particularly defines SoTL. We consult with our colleagues, conduct research, record the results, share our findings with others in the field, and invite peer review and evaluation. By way of these final activities, the body of knowledge about teaching and learning continues to grow and can be built upon by others.

SoTL research can take many forms. We might, for example, engage in traditional quantitative research, conduct surveys, keep a log of our classroom observations, take pictures or videos, or interview students. The ways in which we share our findings in the SoTL are also different and more varied from the traditional modes of publication. Scholars of teaching and learning have other options in addition to publishing articles and books. The sharing of information can also take place in panel discussions and at conferences, as well as in presentations, in videos, on posters and on the internet. When the findings are readily available, our peers can then scrutinize them and offer us feedback. Because we pass on and entrust our work to other scholars of teaching and learning, it is available to be further built upon. And so the cycle continues.

My first encounter with scholarship in education was at Concordia University in Montreal where, as a newly married young adult, I worked as a secretary for the educational studies department so that I could afford to advance my own education. While typing manuscripts for the professors for whom I worked, I first learned about the philosophy of education and educational reform. The writings of people such as Gramsci, who called for the type of education that would develop working class intellectuals and Friere's literacy work with the poor, left me with a dormant seed that would later begin to sprout. These traditional scholars addressed the reasons that education is so important and what needed to be taught to create an empowered society. They were engaged with the what and why of education and, as was traditional, went on to publish their works in print.

Later in my life, after a career in social services, I returned to the field of education as a student. I chose this field because I knew that I could help to empower people by offering them opportunities to reach their educational goals. It was during this time that I began to ask how I would create the conditions needed for significant, enduring, meaningful learning to take place (personal conversation, Macpherson, March 28, 2007). I also wanted to know how I would measure whether the students were truly learning under these conditions. I recognized that why and what we teach must be accompanied by a focus on whom, how, when and where we teach. Or, more precisely, we need to examine the conditions under which individual students and groups learn best. Almost two decades after my first encounter with scholarship in education, I noticed a significant shift. In addition to traditional educational research and scholarship, we now had SoTL.

To date, I have been working on all but the last two SoTL activities that involve publicly sharing and inviting review and evaluation. In my classroom, I found that my students were not attending class regularly and that their progress was slowed because of this. One of my hobbies is playing the djembe, an African hand drum. Since I'd

benefited in many ways from playing the drum in community rhythm circles, I decided to try this activity with my students to see if there were any differences in students' behaviour and learning with rhythm circles. At the outset, I wanted to know if others had done work in this area. My first activity involved studying and research. I found that people were using community rhythm circles in numerous fields as well as in elementary school classrooms. I came across only one study of rhythm circles being used in post secondary education, so I knew that there was a need to further explore my idea (and build upon others'). Next, I created the project, received a grant for the research, and put it into practice by holding rhythm circles with my students. When barriers to completing the project arose, I continued to reflect and create so that I could modify my project to accommodate the circumstances. Yet, I could not have proceeded without consulting my colleagues who offered fresh ideas and support.

I chose three methods to record the outcome of my study: a personal log of my observations, a participant survey, and video recordings of people using percussion instruments in the rhythm circle. My next step will be to evaluate the information I gather, including possible changes in my students' attendance and progress. Then, if the outcome of the study is significant, I will put it into a format that will be conducive to sharing my findings publicly. I have contemplated doing this via a presentation, a workshop and/or a journal article. The preparation of these will provide me with further opportunity for reflection and continued research.

I feel fortunate to be an instructor during this inspiring era. As a creative person, I'm pleased that my ideas are not only accepted by my peers but are also encouraged and supported. I doubt we would have found published university-led studies twenty or more years ago on the type of research in which I am engaged. It simply would not have been considered credible or valuable.

Our professor from years ago who read from his notes might teach quite differently today. Today, I would suggest, he would look at us as he speaks, show a stimulating PowerPoint presentation, remember our names if the class isn't too large, and ask us to work on a team project that will be presented to the class. He may also note that when he asks students to work in pairs to discuss a question that he poses, their answers are richer and their learning more durable. His current research question might even ask if his students' learning is enhanced when he provides diverse activities that address varying learning styles. As a lifelong learner, I would be eager to take a course with this educator.

I've noted a dozen activities that help to describe the scholarship of teaching and learning. Throughout all of these, we continue to reflect on our practice and our students' learning. There may be additional SoTL activities that I've failed to notice. I would be interested in knowing if the reader agrees that the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is a relatively new discipline in itself? Do I need to challenge my belief that if we engage in the activities of a scholar of teaching and learning that we will truly make a difference to our students? I invite comments in answer to the questions I have posed and suggestions from those who would add to or modify the list of SoTL activities I offer.

### **References**

Shulman, L. (1999). Taking learning seriously. [Electronic version]. *Change*, 31(4), 10-17. Retrieved March 20, 2007 from <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/publications/sub.asp?key=452&subkey=618>