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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

In Defense of Microscopes

Discussions of SoTL often highlight the field's tendency toward small-scale, localized studies. Some note that SoTL practitioners are more likely to see the subjectivity of knowing the specific participants, situations, practices, and contexts as “an advantage” (Larsson, Mårtensson, Price, and Roxå, 2017, p. 3). Others defend this work and its “particularities” as foundational to building robust knowledge about learning across multiple contexts (Shulman, 2014). Still others argue that this scope of the research “seldom has much impact beyond the individual or individuals concerned” (Tight, 2017). And of course some call for the field to *also* expand its lens to include program-level studies of learning-in-context (Matthews, Divan, John-Thomas, Lopes, Ludwig, Martini, Motley, & Tomljenovic-Berube, 2013).

As we prepared this issue of *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, these conversations came to mind—not so much because of any patterns in participant numbers but because of the way with which learning is treated. We were struck by what we see as one of SoTL's strengths, directly resulting from its highly contextualized work: our “imperative ... of representing complexity well” (Poole, 2013, p. 141). In SoTL, we understand learning and learners in complex ways.

Learning is situated (Green, Eady, & Anderson, 2018), contextualized (Rifenburg & Forester, 2018), socially mediated (Johnstone, Marquis, & Puri, 2018), developmental (Mewis, Dee, Lam, Obradovich, & Cassidy, 2018), and ubiquitous (Johnstone, Marquis, & Puri, 2018). It is often invisible (Shulman, 1999), easily oversimplified (Fallon, 2006), often misunderstood (Skorczewski, 2000).

These local situations and complexities are the bricks that make up the edifices we build through SoTL research. To suggest that the focus of SoTL research is too microscopic is like saying that there is no value in understanding a building's bricks, or a body's cells.

Editing a journal like *TLI* affords the opportunity to see connections among pieces of local research that yield larger portraits of learning and teaching, and how we can do these things better. Writing for a journal like *TLI* challenges authors to help readers make these connections between their localized work and the range of perspectives and experiences of these readers.

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