



SOTL Under Stress: Rethinking Teaching and Learning Scholarship During a Global Pandemic

ABSTRACT

This essay considers how the current age of multiple crises is leading to changes in questions we ask of teaching and learning, questions we ask in SoTL, and the role of SoTL scholars.

KEYWORDS

SoTL, COVID-19, higher education

INTRODUCTION

The academic press has been using words such as “catastrophic,” “disruptive,” and “devastating” to describe the impact of COVID-19 on higher education. Indeed, it would be difficult to deny that, at least in the short term, the global pandemic has wrought major changes on the way universities function, including how they stay afloat financially, how they make decisions, and, perhaps most importantly, how faculty teach and students learn. Given all that is happening, it is perhaps not surprising that the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) appears to have receded from the higher education landscape. Several major universities have postponed campus-based programming (largely out of compassion for overextended and anxious faculty), and major conferences, such as the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) have been cancelled. That recession may be characteristic of the short term, but in the long run, this essay will argue our current period of global crisis has allowed SoTL practitioners to ask different questions of teaching and learning, delve more deeply into previously un- or under-explored lines of inquiry, and expedite new roles for SoTL scholars.

BACKGROUND

The transition to remote instruction in the spring, followed by the emergence of multimodal instruction in the fall, placed a great deal of stress on faculty nearly everywhere as they were forced to radically redesign their courses (often more than once) with limited preparation time. On one hand, these shifts in instructional modality have taken time and attention away from other scholarly activities, especially service and research. A number of preliminary studies have suggested that overall research productivity, especially for women, has been adversely affected by quarantine conditions (Amano-Patiño et al. 2020; Anderson et al. 2020; Eisen et al. 2020; McLaren et al. 2020). From a SoTL perspective, however, the shared experience of millions of faculty undergoing nearly simultaneous teaching transformation constitutes an extraordinary occasion, one that would have seemed unimaginable even a year ago.

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From this collective experience has emerged a set of shared questions centered on how we teach in the age of COVID-19. Trauma-informed pedagogy, for example, has moved from being a small subfield to the front lines, with scholars like Mays Imad taking on heroic roles (Brunzell, Stokes, and Waters 2019; Imad 2020). Even long-standing research topics, such as how you effectively engage students online, take on new meaning when that engagement is mediated not just through technology, but also through the shared experience of social distancing. Questions such as, how do you teach, research without a lab, dance without a studio, and play sports without a gym, have challenged disciplines to have conversations about their most fundamental pedagogical assumptions (Quezada, Talbot, and Quezada-Parker 2020; Villanueva et al. 2020; Youssef et al. 2020). Similar conversations are taking place in the co-curricular arena, e.g. how you have internships without offices, study abroad without travel, and community engagement without leaving the house.

In a sense, however, the emergence of new questions about teaching and learning is not a distinctive characteristic of our current age. SoTL has always been, and continues to be, an iterative discipline so that as context changes, so do the questions we ask (Fanghangel 2013; Felten 2013). More broadly speaking, the end goal of most forms of research is not about finding definitive solutions and closing off debate, as it is opening up new lines of inquiry (Brew 2001). This is why, for example, a standard academic paper, including works of SoTL, ends with a section on implications for future research. What may be distinctive about the current cycle is not that we, as reflective practitioners and/or SoTL scholars, are asking new questions about teaching and learning, but rather that we are experiencing the emergence of new types of questions.

NEW TYPES OF QUESTIONS

How's it working?

Pat Hutchings famously asserted that SoTL has four essential questions, ranging from “what is” to “what could be (visions of the possible)” (2000). Part of her intention in presenting this typology was to suggest that there are other possible lines of inquiry through beyond the commonplace “what works?” questions. Despite her encouragement, this latter type of question continues to predominate in the SoTL literature, perhaps because “what works” most closely resembles how many faculty think about teaching, shifting their habitual reflecting *in action* (during class) to reflecting *on it* (after class) (Schön 1984). The standard format of a “what works” study is for a faculty member to identify a problem, determine a possible solution, implement that solution, and then, once the intervention and/or class is over, assess the extent to which the intervention addressed the problem (Bishop-Clark and Dietz-Uhler 2012; Healey 2000). The results of these processes, then, in turn, contribute to a shared knowledge base, which Huber and Hutchings called the teaching commons, from which others can draw both knowledge and inspiration (2006).

Let us consider how this line of inquiry fits into present circumstances. The adjective “unprecedented” has been frequently (some might argue too frequently) evoked in reference to circumstances of teaching under COVID-19 (Maloney and Kim 2020). The term is telling because it serves to essentially shut off the connection between the past and the present. When it comes to pedagogy, this means that our prior evidence-base, that pre-existing teaching commons, may or may not

be applicable to the current environment. Normally, we have the ability to learn from those who came before us, but the current experience is not staggered but simultaneous, which means that we need to develop an almost entirely new body of evidence-based practice and we need to do so all at once—very quickly (DeSantis and Dammann 2020). For this body of evidence-based practice to be ready just in time, faculty need to be able to access it in September, not May, when it will be too late. Given these circumstances, we propose a variation of Huber’s original tense: the “how’s it working?” question.

The “how’s it working” question is about capturing the impact of a teaching intervention in mid-flight, as it is occurring, rather than waiting until the end. It is also about the thought process behind the strategy and how it is mapping (or not) onto the evolving learning experiences of the students and the changing conditions at the institution. In some ways, it shifts the emphasis back to Schön’s “reflection in action” (1984). That said, this latter is not, in and of itself, new to SoTL. Practitioners have long embraced the premises of approaches such as action research and improvement science, both of which emphasize iterative practice and ongoing process (Crow, Hinnant-Crawford, and Spaulding 2019; Harvey and Jones 2020; Ryan 2013). What is new, however, is the factor of immediacy.

Prior to COVID-19, a typical SoTL journal might take anywhere from six to twelve months to publish an article after submission, and that’s assuming that there are no substantive revisions requested AND that there will be a sufficient number of reviewers with the bandwidth to provide feedback in a timely fashion. What has emerged under COVID-19, however, are special issues with rapid turnaround times, some offering expedited review processes. *The Journal of Faculty Development*, for example, issued several calls for special issues on SoTL topics, including one on transitioning active learning to online learning environments. Short contributions (c. 1,000 words) were due in early August, decisions issued in late August, and publication scheduled for early October. Similarly, the *Journal of Microbiology and Biology Education* publicized a special issue on teaching in a time of crisis, specifically encouraging “how’s it working” studies with the following statement, “for those of you who are new to publishing teaching scholarship: consider submitting your best teaching idea in the JMBE Tips & Tools section – no assessment data is required”¹. While instructors are also sharing smaller resources and tips through social media and disciplinary forums, publication outlets such as these described above are exploring new pathways for integrating and elevating evolving practice into the domain of scholarship.

In addition to considering what a more nimble and varied scholarly apparatus might look like, the “how’s it working” question may also provoke conversations about the nature of research and the epistemology of SoTL in the future. This suggests an expansion of scope, in which we sustain our engagement with emergent evidence alongside of the more conventional forms of social science data. Perhaps we recognize that the product of research may not always have to be a fully concluded study that provides clear solutions, but rather could also be an insightful work in progress that invites further, and larger, conversations. As Randy Bass notes, “the co-evolution of [SoTL]’s problems and the tools it has to address them should radically expand our approaches toward improving education rather than narrow them” (2020).

What’s your story?

COVID-19 is not the only challenge with which the world is currently grappling. Campuses in the United States have been beset by strikes and protests over police brutality, triggered by high-profile

cases such as the death of George Floyd. Several South African universities had suspended instruction even prior to COVID-19 because of at-times-violent student protests regarding persistent issues of access and inclusion. Universities in Hong Kong have been dealing with widespread protests over the looming clash between new security regulations and the intellectual values of higher education, with students playing active and visible roles. This list could easily be extended as the global pandemic has served to exacerbate previously existing social, political, and economic tensions in countries all over the world, leading many universities to rethink the role universities can, and arguably should, play in navigating, even possibly ameliorating, these highly charged environments (Kafka 2020).

This heightened atmosphere has galvanized many faculty to bring a host of contemporary issues into the classroom, though this is certainly not a novel strategy (just ask a professor who taught in the United States during the 1960s or in Egypt during the 2010s). What has emerged, however, is a renewed emphasis on amplification, especially the power of connecting individual voices to others as a vehicle for social change. Viewed in mediums from documentaries to TikTok videos, there has been an outpouring of personal narratives, whether these are experiences of marginalization, oppression, or even outright suppression. These examples are not there just to be fodder for teaching. Rather, a growing number of studies have revealed the existence of deep biases within higher education itself (Goos and Salomons 2017; Mahmud and Gagnon 2020). Implicit in this wave of narrative crowd-sourcing is recognition of the value of lived experience, not just as anecdote, but as catalysts and, perhaps most importantly, as evidence. We therefore propose a second question type, “what is your story?”.

Yet again, this proposed question type is not entirely new. There are previous SoTL scholars who have advocated for the inclusion of approaches such as auto-ethnography, scholarly personal narratives (SPNs), and even what one group of scholars deems “me-search” (Bochner and Ellis 2016; Bradley and Nash 2011; Brookfield 2013; Ng and Carney 2017; O’Hara 2018). Similarly, we have seen a rise in studies that incorporate ethnographic methods to capture the lived experiences of various groups within higher education (Herckis 2018; Nathan 2006; O’Meara et al. 2020). What is somewhat different now, though, is the overlap between personal narrative and various forms of social justice (McIntosh and Wright 2019). This new narrative has its roots in critical pedagogy, but it is not always beholden to the same theoretical and conceptual lenses of that school. The transition from narrative to voice is one not only of speaking out and up, but also of making more space at SoTL’s “family table” for multiple voices to be heard (Chick 2013).

Speaking of that table, there have long been advocates within the SoTL movement for a multiplicity of disciplinary and methodological voices under its “big tent” (Fanghangel 2013; Hubball and Clarke 2010), but we are now seeing the emergence of other types of voices, including those of varying lived experiences, institutional cultures, and organization roles (both formal and informal). This latter is most notable in the rising interest in the amplification of student voice, and the inclusion of students as partners in SoTL research (Cook-Sather 2006; Cook-Sather 2018), but there are others. As the complexity of the teaching and learning enterprise expands, so does the influence of tertiary partners such as instructional designers, educational developers, and community members, whose positionality vis a vis scholarship continues to evolve (Felten and Chick 2019; Newton, Miller-Young, and Sanago 2019; Seeto and Harrington 2006).

When we do put our voices together, you may ask, what are we, as SoTL scholars, amplifying? Advocacy has been a central feature of SoTL since its inception, if not before, albeit within a fairly narrow range. Our efforts focused, at least at first, on getting a seat at the table and garnering recognition as a legitimate form of scholarship. Implicit in much of SoTL work, too, is the advancement of a vision of teaching and learning that is reflective, innovative, and generative (Danielson 2012). Until recently, the object of our advocacy has largely been an internal audience, as we direct our megaphone back on ourselves as faculty, staff, students, and leaders in higher education (Friberg and McKinney 2019; Huber and Robinson 2016).

Not long before the outbreak of COVID-19 in the United States, then-ISSOTL president Nancy Chick articulated a potentially new role for SoTL as public scholarship, one that turns that megaphone outward, suggesting that SoTL voices can serve as a critical linkage between what/how universities teach (and students learn) and the broader public outside of academia's hallowed halls (Chick and Friberg 2020). The realm of public scholarship is replete with publication outlets and mediums that SoTL scholars have, at least to date, under-utilized and, arguably, under-appreciated. Rather than seeking out academic journals with low acceptance rates or high citation numbers, for example, public scholars emphasize wide readership, high visibility, and social impact. A recent example of this is #ScholarStrike, a US-based movement started by a faculty member (Anthea Butler) and an educational developer (Kevin Gannon) who utilized multiple social media channels to call for a two-day break in instruction and administrative duties to focus on raising awareness around diversity, equity, and inclusion issues within and outside of higher education. They started with less than a dozen supporters, and, as of this writing, their numbers are now in the tens of thousands. This is impact beyond the reach of impact factors, suggesting the need to reconsider how we value and evaluate works of scholarship, including SoTL.

How do we make sense of...all of this?

The Twitter feed associated with #ScholarStrike is itself an example of a multiplicity of voices, including contributions from supporters, detractors, critics, fans, trolls, snowflakes, and many more. These disparate voices are indicative of the super complexity, a.k.a the messiness, a.k.a the wickedness of the challenges facing contemporary higher education (Bass 2020; Krause 2012; Ramley 2014). Navigating the present reality and the future aspirations of universities, including speculation on their role in transforming a post-pandemic world, will require highly adept creative and analytical minds, deep knowledge of higher education as an enterprise and ideal, and mastery of a host of professional skills. In the words, we need trained scholars now, perhaps more than ever, not only to facilitate learning and create knowledge, but also to help us make sense of ourselves and the varied and variable world around us. Our last proposed question type, "how do we make sense of...all of this?" invites us to consider where SoTL fits into these larger scholarly conversations.

Like our previous proposals to extend the SoTL question typology, this candidate is not entirely new. In historical societies, one of the distinguishing social functions of the scholarly or intellectual class was often its role in making sense of larger events, i.e. of engaging in collective reflection on behalf of a society (Burke 2013). A distinguishing characteristic of our current crisis, however, is the public and (at times) highly vocal skepticism expressed toward the value of expertise and the role of scholars and

experts (Merkely 2020). These place an additional burden of proof on the public scholar, i.e. credibility not just as an expert on a particular subject, but also for the value of experts more broadly. At first glance, it may seem like this state of affairs constitutes a particularly inauspicious time for a newly formed cadre of SoTL public scholars to emerge. We would argue, on the other hand, that SoTL scholars are especially well-suited to enter this fray and tame some of those savage beasts.

Unlike many other disciplines and scholarships, SoTL has embraced reflection as both good practice and, especially, as a form of scholarly discourse (Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten 2019). While much of that reflective lens had been directed at our own practice as educators, we could view that as a warm-up toward reflection that extends beyond the classroom, a broader vision that SoTL has started to embrace recently (Friberg and McKinney 2019). Our scholarship may have been grounded in disciplinary practice, but, conceptually, it crosses over many disciplines, meaning that, at its core, the field is inherently integrative. Over time, that integrative orientation has become social as well as intellectual, as the movement has worked consciously to foster scholarly networks, communities, and meaningful connections within and across disciplines, campuses, and communities (Simmons and Taylor 2019; Sipes, Minix, and Barton 2020; Verwoord and Poole 2016). In other words, we are highly adept at building bridges. In our early years, these networks served primarily to advance the SoTL frontier, but perhaps now that relationship can also work in reverse, e.g. the bridges flow both ways.

A common theme that has emerged from preliminary studies and countless internal studies of faculty, staff, and students under COVID-19 conditions is the need, perhaps even a yearning, to feel a sense of connection, even belonging, while staying apart. We are suggesting that scholarship can bridge that divide, and not just as an excuse for a Zoom chat with a colleague. Rather, certain forms of scholarship, particularly when constructed as an open dialogue, can form the basis of what activist bell hooks calls an “intellectual fellowship” (1994). The basis of our current fellowship is the shared experience of teaching and learning in 2020. SoTL, which gives us the vehicle through which we enrich our own perspectives, can also lead us toward efforts to make sense of “...all this” in the same way we were able to weather its day- to-day challenges, i.e. together. The authors foresee a rising number of collaborative studies, multi-person projects, crowd-sourced documents, and general treatises that reflect a dissolving of previously held boundaries, whether technological, organizational, or disciplinary, and the re-creation of new, highly inter-related and inter-dependent systems of meaning-making.

CONCLUSION

What does this mean for SoTL?

Speaking of meaning-making, the purpose of this essay was to propose that SoTL add three new types of questions to its repertoire, not only as a means of investigating, but also navigating, the changes to teaching, learning, and scholarship following in the wake of the current global pandemic. Each of our question types are vulnerable to criticisms, some that SoTL has weathered before, others that have taken on new strength (Boshier 2009). To embrace “how’s it going,” for example, could possibly lead us to jettison the often-cumbersome apparatus of a full-blown, conventional pre- and post-study in favor of a more nimble teaching as research model. While this may sound appealing to some, it could come with a price, i.e. the hard-fought delineation between scholarship and scholarly teaching (Potter and Kustra

2011). Similarly, the “what’s your story” question endangers SoTL’s equally hard-fought reputation for quality, largely forged through rigorous application of social science methodologies, which leave little space for the telling of stories. Both public scholars and crowdsourced wisdom have a long way to go before they are fully embraced by the academy.

This glass is not just half-empty. The profound shock of COVID-19 (and related crises) may have exacerbated our divisions, but it has also led us to evoke compassion on an equally unprecedented scale. The way forward involves not just technological innovation, but also attention to our shared humanity and, by extension, the study of the previously beleaguered humanities. The need for cross-disciplinary collaboration has never been more evident than it is right now. The sharing of our individual experiences, our stories, will provide SoTL, as a field, the collective opportunity to look inward, check our own biases (McKinney and Chick 2010), and navigate our own marginalities, in preparation for taking on more public roles within a greatly expanded teaching commons. In terms of making sense of the world, the SoTL movement had already proven itself to be quite resilient, largely because of the deep idealism at its heart, an idealism that was, admittedly, challenged by the previous shift toward institutionalization, but never extinguished. Rather than despair of our current situation, we should perhaps be proud of the fact that, through the darkest hours of modern academic history, we have sustained, and been sustained by, a love of teaching, care for our students, and the belief that higher education matters.

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NOTES

1. Both of these call for papers were received as subscriber emails from the journal publishers.

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