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Shifting Discourse in College Teaching

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Abstract

The pedagogical efficacy of traditional approaches to teaching that involve direct instruction in a subject-centered approach is being questioned constantly in higher education. Thus, this paper examines the shifting discourse in college teaching that emphasizes student learning and excellence in teaching, including implications resulting from this shift. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is one of the models engendering this discursive shift. In addition to addressing the implications of this shift, this paper is meant to provoke more dialogue and praxis to advance the cause of pedagogical methodologies that promote student learning and teaching effectiveness. Moreover, the bigger picture of this shift is outlined in the context of other trends in higher education that need further study in which SoTL can be a methodological factor.

Keywords

Scholarship of teaching and learning, SoTL, Student learning assessments, Teaching effectiveness assessments

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Abstract

The pedagogical efficacy of traditional approaches to teaching that involve direct instruction in a subject-centered approach is being questioned constantly in higher education. Thus, this paper examines the shifting discourse in college teaching that emphasizes student learning and excellence in teaching, including implications resulting from this shift. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is one of the models engendering this discursive shift. In addition to addressing the implications of this shift, this paper is meant to provoke more dialogue and praxis to advance the cause of pedagogical methodologies that promote student learning and teaching effectiveness. Moreover, the bigger picture of this shift is outlined in the context of other trends in higher education that need further study in which SoTL can be a methodological factor.

Excellence in college teaching signifies a corresponding outcome in student learning. However, Seidel, L. F., Benassi, V. A., Richards, H. J., & Lee, M. J. (2006) in *College Teaching as a Professional Study* posit that having a terminal degree does not prepare one for the complex enterprise of college teaching. They used Boice (1992) and Fink (1984) to help underline their thesis. At the tertiary level in the United States and as a growing trend internationally, student learning and excellence in teaching are becoming the foci. For example, back in the 1990's, the Carnegie Institute conceptualized a research and evidence based approach to college teaching with public, scholarly outcomes. In 1998, the [Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning](#) (CASTL) was created to advance its cause in tertiary institutions and professional societies. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning has become popular at many institutions in the United States and [internationally](#) and is a direct challenge for change to institutions that use traditional educational practices. SoTL is helping to re-conceptualize traditional discourses in education that emphasize subject and teacher-centered models in which disconnected research, evidence-gathering, and research outcomes tend to be academy focused. SoTL focuses on authentic learning and teaching by interconnecting teaching and learning, research, inquiry, evidence gathering, and public sharing of information and research to advance student learning and teaching effectiveness.

Consequently, teaching and learning become authentic scholarship that transforms the classroom/educational environment into a "pedagogical laboratory." During the pedagogical process the teacher also inquires, reflects, researches, gathers and documents evidence, and then shares research and findings with colleagues/others in professional forums in a constant effort to increase student learning and improve the craft of teaching. At both the pre-collegiate and collegiate levels educational discourse is thus shifting toward a student learning focus, henceforth excellence in teaching. Consequently,

the educational stakes are high in the areas of assessment and educational politics, teaching effectiveness, and the meaning of an educated person.

This shifting discourse in college teaching to create a climate in which students are empowered through authentic learning by focusing on their learning needs has stimulated concerns about assessment practices. Not surprisingly, political tensions that manifest in promoting excellence in student learning tend to result from conventional assessment methods vis-à-vis progressive student learning models like SoTL. First, the bell curve seemingly has given immortal credence to the misconception that assessment outcomes should fall within a normal distribution on a high and low continuum. Consequently, this conception has given significant meaning to and a preference for [norm-referenced testing](#), particularly in college entrance exams and in college courses. Seemingly, many instructors' views of assessment have been influenced by administrators' preoccupation with the bell curve logic, i.e. achievement ranges from high to low in a bell shape.

Second, criterion-referenced testing attempts to set standards above the norm with a high achievement focus. In essence, students are expected to learn at high levels, not within a normal distribution. Third, promoting student learning at high levels, as SoTL promotes, presupposes that students learn differently which requires differentiated pedagogy grounded in research. And, fourth, there is growing concern about grade inflation at many tertiary institutions in the United States, although studies have questioned the validity of such concerns. Alfie Kohn, in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2001), revealed a national decline in high grades in comparison to previous years. Nonetheless, grade inflation concerns have ushered in measures to make assessment more bell curve consistent. More specifically, some tertiary institutions in the United States have even implemented policies to quantify how many A's students should earn. Princeton University became the national focus in 2004 in the grade inflation discourse. This concern resulted in the university implementing sweeping corrective policies across departments; maintaining percentages of grades within certain distribution parameters was enacted (Stevens, J., 2004, p. 1). These tensions and practices have immense implications, particularly for junior faculty.

The implications for junior faculty include being confused about their charge, afraid of going against grading policies and practices in light of earning tenure/promotion, and professional development. Junior faculty being confused about their charge involves the meaning of excellence in teaching since most of them probably have not had any professional development in pedagogy. Therefore, differentiated instruction becomes pedagogically problematic and assessing instruction a challenge. Instructors lacking training in pedagogy may be unprepared and confused if multiple teaching and assessment strategies backed up by SoTL-oriented research are required. Furthermore, if grading policies are enacted that stipulate grade percentages, instructors may conform, since earning tenure/promotion may require compliance with such practices.

Therefore, since many institutions want a pedagogical emphasis on student learning, Sustained and effective professional development for faculty becomes an imperative. However, if an institution is committed to student learning and encourages SoTL approaches in the context of faculty development, then the concerns emanating from junior faculty may be mute. Suffice it to note that SoTL would be excellent as a foundation for professional faculty development.

Determining grading percentages (A's to F's) prior to teaching contradicts the logic of SoTL, which requires assessment to be based on what is best to promote student learning through constant pedagogical research in the classroom—devising and conducting research, collecting evidence/data, interpreting data, sharing results with colleagues/others, and implementing findings that best promote student learning. As such, if instructors improve their teaching effectiveness through a SoTL-based professional development program, a predetermination of grades takes us back to norm-referenced assessment practices and teacher-centered models detached from authentic pedagogical scholarship. This is essentially where the conflicts lies in determining teaching effectiveness. Hypothetically, if a teacher employs SoTL pedagogical methods with assessments that engage students based on how they learn best, inevitably assessment outcomes would improve. Consequently, grade inflation would not and should not be an issue.

My collective teaching experiences for a generation at various levels indicate that when students are pedagogically engaged in how they best learn, their interest in and enthusiasm for learning is greatly heightened. Consequently, students' educational achievement is much higher and is reflected in their grades. If teaching effectiveness is inextricably tied to student learning in a SoTL context, the instructor should have pedagogical autonomy to bring out the best in students.

Thus, what are the implications for promoting student learning? How does/can SoTL contribute to redefining an educated person? What constitutes an educated person?

In The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Contributions of Research Universities, William E Becker and Moya L. Andrews (2004) assert that "Reallocating a minute from research to teaching (or teaching to research) can actually often improve the teaching (research) product and be a transforming experience for researcher/teachers and learners as well" (p. 2). Becker and Andrews reaffirm the connection among teaching, research, and student learning, including the enhanced consequential benefits these three dimensions receive. To be educated a student must be organically connected to classroom research that seeks to effect student learning through best practices. However, if a teacher is influenced by predetermined grade percentages, pedagogical approaches like SoTL will be compromised. How can this dilemma be addressed?

Tertiary institutions need to implement on-going professional development programs, especially for new (and not so new) faculty lacking pedagogical training and for faculty and administrators involved in curriculum policymaking. SoTL has a significant role here, such as programs like the Cognate MST and MST programs for faculty and doctoral students at the University of New Hampshire (USA). Many institutions have SoTL programs like Georgia Southern University, Indian University Bloomington, Southeast Missouri State University, etc. supported by the institutional culture in which faculty development and an overall purpose are well established. Teaching is a complex, organic process constantly in a state of flux, evolution, and negotiation that necessitates persistent inquiry, assessment, and revitalization. Suffice it to say SoTL is at the core of

such pedagogical persistence since it is inquiry driven, reflective, research and evidence based, and uses findings to constantly improve student learning and teaching effectiveness.

In SoTL programs assessment of student learning and teaching effectiveness is connected to best practices, as determined by constant classroom research. However, if we continue

to use standardized tests to measure teaching effectiveness, student learning, and overall educational achievement, a re-conceptualization of such tests becomes imperative. On many standardized tests (PPST, SAT, ACT, GRE, MAT, etc), knowledge and learning are reduced mainly to the verbal and logical domains that are predetermined for all students. Differentiated assessment is thus needed to supplement the reliance on linguistic and logical intelligence, important as it is, and should emerge from best practices regarding multiple intelligences and assessment (Gardiner 2000). If some students excel kinesthetically or existentially, why not create assessment mechanisms for them to demonstrate their learning potentialities? SoTL with its research emphasis can be the protagonist effecting this methodological re-conceptualization.

As a committed teacher, I strongly believe that students must be at the core of pedagogy and SoTL recognizes the centrality of student learning experiences. Promoting student learning via excellence in teaching is an engaging enterprise since it requires a level of commitment to teaching and learning, resources, and on-going professional and educational development for faculty that many institutions find challenging or seem unwilling to provide and sustain. Furthermore, technology, the growing trend in online and distance education, globalization, and market ideologies continue to create methodological challenges regarding best practices in pedagogy. However, with the organic and authentic approach that SoTL provides, such challenges can be ameliorated.

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