Theory: The Elephant in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Room

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Abstract

Excerpt: November, 2006 marked the third annual meeting of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and it was another blockbuster, with 850 participants, a rich array of sessions, the "Commons@ISSoTL" for informal exchange and sharing of resources, and a true international feel. As in past years, the conference also provided a window into the character and progress of the work, and a chance to ask where we are, what has been accomplished, and where we're going. These questions leave room for considerable disagreement, of course. As in the parable of the blind men and the elephant, the scholarship of teaching and learning can look quite different depending on which parts of the conference anatomy one grabbed hold of. Even so (and with apologies for shifting tropes), I doubt that I was alone in seeing the role of theory in the scholarship of teaching and learning as the elephant in the room.

Keywords

Commons@ISSoTL

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This theme was hard to miss, first, because so many of the presentations had explicit theoretical dimensions. As the person sitting next to me in the final session observed, this year's conference had far fewer "show and tell" sessions and much more evidentiary and conceptual grounding. The work of William Perry, John Bransford, Keith Trigwell, Lee Shulman, Carolin Kreber, Tom Angelo and others were on many lips, handouts, PowerPoint slides, and, in several cases, on lecterns since some of them attended the conference and spoke for themselves. That said, a number of participants confessed to a larger appetite for theory (the UK's Graham Gibbs made a particularly pointed statement to this effect in a noon-time plenary session), and in this they enjoyed good and long-standing company. Early on in Carnegie's work on the scholarship of teaching and learning, a visitor to the Foundation—and a supporter of the work—noted that the scholarship of teaching and learning was "seriously undertheorized." Much of the definitional work that has been done since then points to the need to draw on the work of others, including theoretical work—and this urging is the central theme of an excellent new book by Maryellen Weimer, as well. In fact, most would surely agree that the scholarship of teaching and learning, like any scholarship, must be connected to the work of others, be it practice, research, or theory. What is less clear is what is meant by the final element in that trio.

For starters, there are questions about which (and whose) theories we're talking about. My colleague Mary Huber tells the story of a conference she participated in several years ago. Her presentation focused on disciplinary differences in the scholarship of teaching and learning, and the varied dispositions, methods, and resources that different fields bring to the work. When she finished, "a distinguished senior scholar of higher education" shot up his hand to ask, "What about theory and all the existing research on student learning and faculty development?" As Huber points out, the exchange highlights a tension that runs through the scholarship of teaching and learning (Huber, 2006, p. 69). On the one hand, there is clearly a rich

and relevant vein of theoretical work about learning and how it occurs—theories about the development of expertise, learning styles, deep and surface learning, stages of intellectual development, the improvement of teaching, and so forth.   But not all scholars of teaching find what they're looking for in those theories, and discipline-based theories may also play an important role. For instance, Mariolina Salvatori and Patricia Donahue have studied and written about the role that difficulty plays in learning, and in doing so they draw primarily on theory in their own field of English studies—the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, literary theory by George Steiner, Helen Elam, Wolfgang Iser, and others. Similarly, sociology, anthropology, and management (to name just a few) have highly relevant theoretical frameworks and foundations to bring to this work, and their contributions were visibly on display at the conference.

What was also evident was the variety of roles that theory plays in different contexts, and the different shapes it can take. Some of the possible differences were vividly illustrated in a session entitled "Peer Review in SoTL." A first segment, presented by two engineering faculty from Lund University, in Sweden, focused on the conceptual model that guides work on the scholarship of teaching and learning in their setting; their PowerPoint slides traced the development of a "two-dimensional matrix model," with X and Y axes, a bisecting diagonal vector that overlaid other key concepts, and, yes, a three-by-three matrix to categorize and peer review scholarship of teaching and learning projects. Their theory was elegant, multi-faceted, and (after all, they are engineers) practical. A second segment, presented by Marian McCarthy from University College Cork, in Ireland, included no diagrams or matrices but moved the audience through a series of metaphors and images from architecture and art history; McCarthy's interest was in the power of signs and symbols to create a context of shared meaning in which new work can develop, and toward this end she drew on her background in drama and semantic theory. The pairing of the two presentations was a sharp reminder that "theory" takes multiple forms (models, for instance, but also metaphors) and connects to practice in different ways (in the first case quite deductively, in the second much more organically and by induction).

Readers interested in these kinds of differences would do well to consult the work of Janet Donald—who, not coincidentally, was a speaker at the first ISSoTL conference in 2004. Based on more than twenty-five years of research, Donald's 2002 volume *Learning to Think* lays out a rich and elegant description of the approaches to thinking taken in different disciplines, and the ways in which various fields structure and organize knowledge. Physics, she proposes, is the prototypical "hard" discipline, with a high degree of consensus around a small number of theoretical models and frameworks. At the other end of the continuum lie the humanities, disciplines that "do not have a body of theory that is subscribed to by all members of the field" and that are therefore much more diffuse and less consensus-bound (Donald, 2002, p.10). Her aim is to map the diversity of knowledge terrains, and to remind us as scholars and teachers—and I would add as scholars of teaching and learning—that there is no one true path, that important work proceeds in quite different ways, and that effective learning depends on recognizing those differences.

In this way, Donald's work also challenges us to think about where the scholarship of teaching and learning sits in the disciplinary pantheon. In particular, there are questions about the role of theory in work that is explicitly and self-consciously embedded in practice. In a recent issue of *Change* magazine, Georgetown University

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microbiologist Heidi Elmendorf writes about her development of an alternative to lab-based science courses in which students teach what they are themselves learning in elementary-school classrooms in Washington, D.C. This work did not, as Elmendorf tells the story, begin in previously existing theory or research, or in an ambition to undertake a "a study." It began with a commitment to finding better ways to teach students who see science "as a specialized subject in which only experts well versed in its language and cultural norms may participate" (Elmendorf, 2006, p. 37-38). More specifically, its genesis was in an insight gleaned, somewhat serendipitously, from a student who happened to be volunteering through AmeriCorps in a fourth-grade classroom. As her new approach evolved, however, Elmendorf and her collaborator, Randy Bass, have begun to develop a theoretical model for the development of expertise, building on the work of others who have focused on that topic, including Bransford and Perkins. Her article in *Change* is a reminder that theory may emerge in the *processes* of teaching and the scholarship of teaching and learning, rather than serving as its starting point—and that the theory most at issue is that which informs ongoing practice. In such work, theory is not an end in itself, but a condition for doing better what we most care about as educators.

Which brings me to a final example and a different angle on "the theory question." Several years ago, as part of the [Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning](#), Mona Phillips, a faculty member in sociology from Spelman College, posed an interesting question about theory. Her question was not about how she, as a scholar of teaching and learning, should employ theory in her project, but about how her students engage with and understood theory. Of course she wanted them to be familiar with major sociological theories and theorists, but equally, and perhaps even more, she wanted them to experience the "joy of theorizing," the kind engagement with ideas through which theory is developed. "I've become increasingly aware of the difficulty my students have in understanding theory," she writes. "I don't mean particular theories or theorists, but the *concept* of theory and what it means to theorize….[They saw theory] as something outside of them, something to which they had no connection. This was troubling to me because as a sociologist I see theorizing as something all of us do everyday, and as an essential part of how we make meaning from our experience" (Phillips, 2000, p. 73).

And maybe that's the critical point here: theory matters in the scholarship of teaching and learning because it is essential to a meaning-making, knowledge-building process. But that process can take many different forms, and may draw on a wide range of sources and disciplinary expertise. The richness of the teaching commons that is now emerging around serious work on teaching and learning (see Huber and Hutchings, 2005) stems in large part from the fact that many different kinds of work, representing a wide range of traditions and contexts, can come in contact with one another, find fertile cross currents, and bring fresh insights and resources to the ongoing conversation about how to strengthen our students' learning.

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