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SoTL in the Commons: Elephant, Authenticity and Journey

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Abstract

Excerpt: I find it useful to refer to the metaphor of an international feel of the 'elephant' presented by Pat Hutchings in the inaugural issue of this journal. Indeed, definitions of scholarship of teaching and learning can be very different depending on which parts of the anatomy one is feeling (or seeing, or experiencing). With a specific focus on the role of theory, Pat took readers through variations of how theory is perceived in different traditions to reach a common ground for all: theory is not an end in itself, but a condition for doing better what we most care about as educators as essential to a meaning-making, knowledge-building process.

Keywords

Open inquiry space for SoTL, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, SoTL

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Since accepting the invitation to write this paper, my mind has been bubbling with many thoughts about the international significance of SoTL. Experiences at the 2005 and 2006 ISSoTL conferences stimulated my initial reflections. My thoughts have been enriched by my recent move to Paris for a period of sabbatical leave where I have gained access to educational discourse in a global context through contact with the headquarters of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). When I finally finished unpacking boxes to begin writing, my mind was refreshed by three particular sources. One was the discourse in Volume 1, Issue 2 of *The International Commons*, newsletter of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and the other two were the invited essays in the January 2007 inaugural issue of this journal, IJ-SoTL.

In my title, the Elephant is taken from one of these invited essays (Hutchings, 2007), and Authenticity is taken from the other (Kreber, 2007). The Journey is more personal, and reflects my own reconceptualization process in response to the opportunities to reflect on SoTL in the extended space of travelling. The major theme of this essay is the open inquiry space for SoTL.

I would like to explore further the potential of the teaching commons, initially articulated by Huber and Hutchings (2005) as a conceptual space in which communities of educators committed to pedagogical inquiry and innovation join force for the advancement of teaching and learning. In some of my earlier work (Kwo, 2003), I observed the power of learning for academics to reconcile with the external pressures from increased regulatory functions of accountability systems when teaching and research are integrated in scholarly discourse and practice. While such learning power has to originate in the private terrain in the context of daily classroom and institutional practice, SoTL can provide an open space not only for developing an alternative culture authentically rooted in the opportunities of learning exchanges, but also for generating a force for new leadership.

I have myself been drawn to the SoTL community by the language of integration in which research and teaching are no longer compartmentalized as separate functions. Shulman (2000, p.99) noted that

> As the scholarship of teaching and learning take hold, and we generate a powerful body of work from the efforts of individual scholars, the distinction traditionally made between the methods of teaching and those of research will gradually disappea r. Each will be understood as a variety of methodologically sophisticated, disciplined inquiry. Each demands activities of design, action, assessment, analysis and reflection.

I find such integration helpful to define my identity as a researcher and an educato r.

The conferences organized by ISSoTL have opened a learning space for celebration of integration. They have also presented opportunities to understand our enlarged identities in the common space for scholarly learning. As remarked by Barbara Cambridge, the ISSoTL President, in *The International Commons* (2006, p.1), the process of "paying careful attention to learning, studying what works in teaching, and altering practice and theory as a result of the scholarly work is apparent before or within any definition of the scholarship of teaching and learning". This expression describes the common orientation for scholars in the community which is well demonstrated in many lively dialogues at the ISSoTL conferences.

I find it useful to refer to the metaphor of an international feel of the 'elephant' presented by Pat Hutchings in the inaugural issue of this journal. Indeed, definitions of scholarship of teaching and learning can be very different depending on which parts of the anatomy one is feeling (or seeing, or experiencing). With a specific focus on the role of theory, Pat took readers through variations of how theory is perceived in different traditions to reach a common ground for all: theory is not an end in itself, but a condition for doing better what we most care about as educators as essential to a meaning-making, knowledge-building process.

In the same issue of the journal, this process was analyzed by Carolin Kreber in terms of authentic practice characterized by what *deeply matters* not just for oneself but for society as a whole. Drawing on the works of Charles Taylor (1991) and Parker Palmer (1998), Carolin described authenticity as the practice of teaching that involves caring about the subject, balanced and enriched by caring about what is in the important interest of students. She called for a connection between scholars of teaching and learning, the 'subject' and the students in authentic relationships. Reading together both essays in the inaugural issue, I can see the convergent focus on students. The 'joy of theorizing' by our students is paralleled with our stance of 'authentic motivation' to do what is ultimately in the important interests of learners.

The attempts to feel this SoTL elephant from different angles can be a healthy way to be in touch with our enlarged selfhood. As we do not live just within our individual classrooms, the open space in the SoTL community can become an important part of our professional life. As an invited member of an international panel of faculty developers during the 2005 ISSoTL conference, I was touched by Teresa Dawson's articulation of her enlarged selfhood in the community:

> My ISSoTL colleagues are inspiring and … conferences like this are essential to my personal intellectual and professional survival.

Beyond our institutional boundaries, our collegiality can be vividly experienced in the public discourse in the SoTL commons during and between conferences. Nancy Randall (ISSoTL Canada Regional Vice President) reported an impressive range of SoTL initiatives as leadership sites in the 2006-2009 Carnegie Foundation for Advancement of Teaching Institutional Leadership Program with coverage of student learning, the impact of faculty development, a meta analysis of SoTL, and the scholarship of technology-enhanced learning. Likewise, Jennifer Robinson (ISSoTL United States Regional Vice President) highlighted evidence of SoTL progress in her context. She also called attention to ways in which students can be involved as informants or co-investigators, and suggested that progress is made over evidence-based debate on models and exemplars for various facets of SoTL. It is also

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informative to read about a number of disciplinary groups that have catalyzed opportunities for collaboration and professional development as a lead-up to the 2007 ISSoTL conference designed to foster intellectually and culturally inclusive scholarship and generate widening perspectives, as presented by Kathy Takayama (ISSoTL Australasia Regional Vice President).

Evidently, SoTL has become an international professional movement amongst scholars committed to higher goals in education. My personal encounter with various leaders of this movement has informed me of the passionate energy vibrating in this SoTL commons with its dynamic of scholarly works at inter-institutional and international contexts. My horizon was significantly broadened by participation in a major forum convened under joint auspices of UNESCO and the G8 political grouping of leaders in economically strong countries. The May 2007 event, held in Trieste, Italy, focused on "Education, Research and Innovation: New Partnership for Sustainable Development."

The global discourse between scientists and educators gave me a new vision to see problems in the light of global challenges of poverty, inequality, social and political instability, migration, and competition in knowledge societies. I was impressed by the scholarship of many participants, including Nobel Prize laureates, who are committed to humanity as global citizens with footprints in less developed countries. When scholars meet from various pathways of research and creation of knowledge, it is not a well-defined agenda that is open to all, but a continual quest for what *really* matters that invigorates scholarship as a means to serve the world rather than being an end in itself. For instance, on facing autonomy and accountability, Pier Ugo Calzolari, Rector of the University of Bologna in Italy, stressed university academics' moral obligations to assert a leadership role:

> The challenge we are facing today is on the one hand, to convince researchers to refuse easy money coming from outside or badly-addressed research funding and on the other hand, to help them build real research projects with excellent objectives. This will help us take big steps ahead of the current state-of-art in each discipline…. We have to develop a real University Research System based on a strategic vision.

My feel of the SoTL 'elephant' in the global context has led me to ponder over the intimacy of our living in terms of the impact of challenges and opportunities. In spite of considerable growth in the global economy, poverty remains a major challenge. Between 1999 and 2004, the number of out-of-school children of primary school age around the world fell by 21 million from approximately 98 million (UNESCO, 2006, p.33). However, the fact that 77 million children remained out of school was an ongoing challenge to humanity. I can see that our SoTL commons as a space for international exchanges can also invite a broadening mindset for a professional journey to a global existence. How would poverty affect the way we see 'learners' and SoTL?

Of course, as fully engaged in our day-to-day institutional responsibilities in our respective institutions, we have enough to care for, and it is natural to see global issues as responsibilities of global organizations. Yet, the global mobility of our university graduates is apparent, as pointed out during the 2006 ISSoTL conference

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by participants in the featured session "Learning across Borders: Internationalizing Undergraduate Teaching and Learning". I am ready to advocate that, in this globally connected world, it is not just curricular innovation that should be pursued for meeting the changes, but also a collective scholarly quest for a common agenda that can be set in our SoTL commons.

To conclude, I appreciate *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning* as a space in our commons for journeying together and reaching for the meaning of our scholarly practice. I value this opportunity to respond to the two essays in the previous issue, and to share my growing awareness of the power of the learning community of SoTL yet to be actualized beyond our institutional boundaries. I believe that, together in the commons, we can significantly deepen understanding our institutional roles, and become more conscious to claim responsibilities as global citizens.

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