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To SoTL or Not to SoTL?

Abstract

Excerpt: "To be, or not to be, that is the question" is one of the most famous lines from Shakespeare's play Hamlet. As a soliloquy, Hamlet's speech represents a monologue of his thoughts and feelings and addresses existential questions. It is generally accepted that in his speech Hamlet is wondering whether he should choose between life and death. Life seems to be full of hardships, yet there is uncertainty at what lies beyond life, what happens after death? It is assumed that the audience (if there is one) would not hear the speaker, however, Hamlet-the character of the play often turns towards the audience and looks the audience in the eye (Vera, 2012).

We engage in soliloquy daily, whether to ourselves or to an audience. When I was asked to do an invited essay, I felt that I too, like Hamlet, needed to collect some of my thoughts, feelings and experiences with SoTL. Engaging in SoTL posed some existential questions for me personally, though luckily I was not talking about life or death. My soliloquy is written in hopes that it would be heard by an international audience and will hopefully help others in their quest to BE.

Keywords

Scholarship of teaching and learning, SoTL

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To SoTL or Not to SoTL?

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Introduction

"To be, or not to be, that is the question" is one of the most famous lines from Shakespeare's play Hamlet. As a soliloquy, Hamlet's speech represents a monologue of his thoughts and feelings and addresses existential questions. It is generally accepted that in his speech Hamlet is wondering whether he should choose between life and death. Life seems to be full of hardships, yet there is uncertainty at what lies beyond life, what happens after death? It is assumed that the audience (if there is one) would not hear the speaker, however, Hamlet-the character of the play often turns towards the audience and looks the audience in the eye (Vera, 2012).

We engage in soliloquy daily, whether to ourselves or to an audience. When I was asked to do an invited essay, I felt that I too, like Hamlet, needed to collect some of my thoughts, feelings and experiences with SoTL. Engaging in SoTL posed some existential questions for me personally, though luckily I was not talking about life or death. My soliloquy is written in hopes that it would be heard by an international audience and will hopefully help others in their quest to BE.

I have been teaching in higher education for nine years. When I started teaching, I had no formal pedagogical training and mostly mirrored the behavior of my college professors. I soon realized that teaching one of the most difficult classes in an allied health curriculum, Human Anatomy and Physiology, meant seeing a lot of failing students. I had what many of us would call a PROBLEM. It is then that I remembered my mother's words about her very short experience as a language teacher in elementary school: "I felt like I explained everything so well, but students just didn't get". I realized that unless I myself learn more about teaching and learning, it would be my first and last year in teaching, too. At the time, I knew very little why some students did better than others, but I knew that I wanted to improve student learning, so I turned to some literature on pedagogy. Diana Laurillard's (1993) claims in her book, *Rethinking University Teaching* that "teachers need to know more than just their subject. They need to know the ways it can come to be understood, the ways it could be misunderstood; they need to know how individuals experience the subject". This was the impetus for my involvement in SoTL, although I was yet to find out that the journey I was about to embark on had a name.

One of the theories used in Health Behavior is the Theory of Reasoned Action. Said theory postulates that the intention of performing a particular behavior is strongly related to the actual performance of that behavior. Two basic assumptions of the theory are 1) behavior is under volitional control and hence is determined by intention and 2) people are rational beings. Environmental factors aside, it means that people behave in a certain way because they choose to do so and they use a rational decision-making process in choosing and

planning their actions. As such, if I were to choose to BE (to SoTL) or NOT TO BE (not to SoTL) in a rational manner, what would my SoTL quest look like?

The SoTL journey

The evolution of my engagement in SoTL mirrored the developmental three-phase continuum of growth according to the Weston-McAlpine model: “growth in one’s own teaching,” “dialogue with colleagues about teaching and learning” and “growth in SoTL” (Cox, 2003). Although the following steps are hardly linear, they map some of the stages I had to embrace in my SoTL quest.

Step 1. Do I know what SoTL is? I stumbled across SoTL during a workshop at the University’s Center for Teaching. I’d like to believe that there was a character of serendipity about it, but this is for another discussion. Naïve as it sounds, while I was examining teaching and learning issues in my classroom and growing in my own teaching, I had no idea that I was en-route to SoTL; that there was an actual name for what I was planning to do. As a result I joined a reading roundtable to discuss Boyer’s book and that was the beginning of my engagement in SoTL.

Boyer first introduced the concept of SoTL in 1990 in “Scholarship Reconsidered”, to complement the scholarship of discovery, integration and application (Boyer, 1990). This model of scholarship has proven to have a major effect in re-conceptualizing scholarship, although, since its introduction more than 20 years ago, there is still an ongoing discussion about a definition for SoTL. Boyer (1990) refers to SoTL as “learning continuously in order to understand one’s field of knowledge and stimulating others to do the same, creating new teaching methodologies, while Kreber and Cranton (2000) include “both ongoing learning about teaching and the demonstration of the teaching knowledge”. Scholarship of teaching involves 1) scholarly teaching – whose purpose is to affect the activity of teaching and resulting learning and 2) a resulting scholarship – a formal, peer-reviewed communication (Richlin and Cox, 2004). Hutchings and Shulman (1999) say that a scholarship of teaching requires a kind of going “meta” in which faculty frame and systematically investigate questions related to student learning – the conditions under which they occur, what it looks like, how to deepen it, and so forth – and do so with an eye not only to improving their own classroom, but to advancing practice beyond it. More recently, there has been a shift to placing more and more emphasis on student learning within SoTL (Cerbin, 2013). Despite the lack of “agreement” on a uniform definition, the literature on SoTL is expanding and SoTL is becoming a line of inquiry for more and more teachers in higher education, including presentations at conferences, publications in journals and support from institutions.

Step 2. Is SoTL for me? I believe that students are central to my career as a teacher and it is my goal to best prepare them, so they can succeed in their aspirations. As a novice teacher I faced questions about teaching and learning on a daily basis and I wanted some answers that engagement in SoTL could provide. However, many times, adopting a behavior is limited by practical constraints. In my own development and in working with other faculty, I encountered many concerns, but the following three were most influential. The first limitation is time, or to be exact, the lack of it. There are plenty professors who would argue that with all the responsibilities they face, there is just not enough time to devote to SoTL, that it is perceived as “one more thing faculty need to do”. McKinney (2007) asserts

that SoTL is *not an add-on* and to me personally it felt that combining teaching with research on teaching did not require a substantial amount of additional time. In fact, I was already doing much of it and it was just a matter of moving forward. The second limitation is self-efficacy: one's confidence in the ability to perform a behavior. Writing an IRB narrative or designing the methodology for a SoTL project can seem overwhelming if it is the first time doing it. This is particularly true for faculty with no training in educational research. I met many participants during our SoTL workshops who just needed a bit of initial help to start their own SoTL project. Finally, for many professors SoTL is just not an option because SoTL is not recognized as scholarship in their department/college/university. This uncertainty remains a barrier for wider faculty engagement (Hutchings, 2011). While my own tenure and promotion were largely based on SoTL research, I am very cognizant of this limitation for many of my fellow colleagues. The decision to SoTL is an individual one and faculty arrive at SoTL for a variety of reasons: concerns in students' mastery or skills, concerns about uneven achievements among different ethnicities or importance of particular pedagogies and goals (Hutchings, P., Huber, M. and Ciccone, A., 2011), but ultimately I think the potential for creating significant learning was the strongest motivator for me.

Step 3. What am I trying to improve? In my Human Anatomy and Physiology class, students have many misunderstandings and face challenges with a variety of topics. One of these difficult topics is protein synthesis. As I saw students struggle with the concept, I designed a role play to help them understand the complex interrelationship of nucleic acids. It seemed that students enjoyed the activity, but I had no data on whether it really improved learning or not. This is how my first SoTL project began; investigating the effectiveness of the role play on students' learning and their perceptions in my own classroom (Sturges, 2009). Later, when I joined a Faculty Learning Community, I also had a chance to see that many teaching concerns are shared by other faculty in different disciplines. Since then, I expanded my investigation into how students learn and what is their classroom experience across disciplines. Some of these projects involved post-exam attendance, disruptive behaviors and motivation. All these results obtained from the SoTL scholarship inform and improve my teaching and hopefully reach a larger audience when I share my results.

I often ask faculty who express interest in SoTL to think of a problem in their classroom they would solve if they were wizards. This is where the conversation about a SoTL project can begin.

Step 4. Should I go for it? Once I developed the intention to proceed with a SoTL project and decided on a problem to solve it was time to jump into action and engage. The observations and questions that came from my own teaching experience had to be translated into a project. I did not have training in educational or social science research, I did not submit an IRB proposals for a SoTL project before and I was really questioning the type of assessment I could use to evaluate my teaching strategy. Seemed like a good time to give up and quit. At this point, I just needed to ask for help. I turned to one of my colleagues who has done SoTL previously. The project still required work, but it progressed much easier and my confidence improved. This was not the big "tent" of the teaching commons, but this collaboration made the difference between pursuing SoTL or not.

I think that collaboration is crucial in successful SoTL because we have to have a dialogue with colleagues about teaching and learning. I later joined a Faculty Learning Community on

SoTL on campus and collaborated on multiple SoTL projects.

Step 5. Should I share my findings? I did not have to, but to be called scholarship, an activity has to be public, peer-reviewed and accessible for exchange and use by the members of one disciplinary community (Shulman, 2011). As such, my next step was to make my results public. I found various resources that can guide faculty in making a SoTL project publishable and even a specific guide for Anatomy and Physiology projects (O'Loughlin, 2006). I shared the results of my SoTL work at multiple venues, including conferences, symposia, workshops and journals. For example, my collaboration with colleagues in the FLC on SoTL resulted in 14 peer-reviewed presentations and five peer-reviewed publications in the period 2009-2013 and became a distinct part of the third phase in my SoTL development- "growth in SoTL".

Step 6. I published; now what?

To quote one of my SoTL colleagues, Lorraine Gilpin, "SoTL is reflective, reflexive, and recursive". Finishing and publishing my first SoTL project certainly did not answer all the questions I had about teaching and learning and neither did the subsequent ones. When it seems that a question about teaching and learning is answered, more challenges come along. Since I can see the benefits of SoTL for myself and for my students, I feel it is my responsibility to make a commitment: a commitment to reflect on the things I learned, to apply my research findings in the classroom and to continue the inquiry. So, I go back to Step 3 and repeat, just with a different question in mind.

This process has been personally and professionally rewarding. SoTL made me a more reflective teacher and forced me to examine my practices in the classroom. Now, when I use the protein synthesis role play in my classroom I do it with a clearer understanding of its effects. I benefitted immensely from collaboration with my colleagues and forged relationships centered on teaching and learning. I learned much from my students and I continue to learn more. SoTL also provided me with a deep sense of satisfaction that I am part of a continuous exploration of teaching and learning.

Epilogue

Ultimately, Hamlet never decides "to be or not to be", so it does not change the plot of play, but the character seems anguished over his indecision. Hamlet might have a death wish as he concludes that the main reason people stay alive is due to the fear of death. But more importantly, he also has a desire for life.

I made the decision TO BE (to SoTL) and to become an advocate for SoTL: I had intent and volitional control. We all make resolutions and, in terms of SoTL, faculty have a choice. Most likely, if you are reading this journal, you made your decision, but if you did not, I encourage you to ask yourself "to be or not to be" in hopes that one day you make a rational decision to To Be more so than Not to Be.

Not many value SoTL as much as other disciplinary research. Even among some of my colleagues there is a wide-spread attitude that SoTL is not "real" research. However, there are rational justifications for SoTL: professionalism, pragmatism and policy (Shulman, 2000). It is our professional obligation to be scholars in our discipline, SoTL helps us to

improve teaching and learning and it can provide evidence for policy decisions.

The question still remains for many of us: to SoTL or not to SoTL?

Special thanks to Trent Maurer, a fellow SoTL-er, who helped me with my first SoTL project; my SoTL FLC colleagues for keeping it real; Dr. Alan Altany who's passion for SoTL inspired me to continue the inquiry and, most importantly, my students, who taught me much of what I know today.

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