Teaching Travels: Reflections on the Social Life of Classroom Inquiry and Innovation

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Abstract
How can the lessons faculty gain through inquiry and innovation in particular classrooms and programs be of use to colleagues teaching elsewhere? Can the scholarship of teaching and learning really travel, in the sense not only of leaving home (through conversation, presentation, or publication) but also of arriving at some destination (through being heard, read, interpreted, used by someone else)? And if so, what travels (pedagogical ideas, methods of study, general inspiration)? How far (between faculty in different disciplinary, institutional, or national contexts)? And what happens to it when it gets there (how do faculty adapt the ideas for their own use)?

Keywords
Classroom inquiry, Classroom innovation

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Reflections on the Social Life of Classroom Inquiry and Innovation

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How can the lessons faculty gain through inquiry and innovation in particular classrooms and programs be of use to colleagues teaching elsewhere? Can the scholarship of teaching and learning really travel, in the sense not only of leaving home (through conversation, presentation, or publication) but also of arriving at some destination (through being heard, read, interpreted, used by someone else)? And if so, what travels (pedagogical ideas, methods of study, general inspiration)? How far (between faculty in different disciplinary, institutional, or national contexts)? And what happens to it when it gets there (how do faculty adapt the ideas for their own use)?

There has been a tendency to look for answers to these questions in matters of theory and method—whether a study’s conceptual apparatus and design assure or limit the wider applicability or generalizability of its findings (Hutchings 2007; Hutchings and Huber 2008). In this essay, I suggest that while theory and method can be critical factors at certain stages in the itinerary of the scholarship of teaching and learning, the very possibility of pedagogical travel is better understood as a function of the work’s social life instead. Indeed, my subtitle, “the social life of classroom inquiry and innovation” borrows deliberately from John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid’s important book: The Social Life of Information (2000; see also Wenger, 1998). Their point, put briefly, is that “information” and the “individuals” who produce and use it, “are inevitably and always part of rich social networks” (Brown & Duguid, p.ix)—and that these networks are central to understanding why knowledge sometimes travels and sometimes does not.

The key, of course, is what one means by “rich” social networks, because—as many a frustrated advocate of a new pedagogical approach can attest—“connectedness” alone is not enough to ensure or explain the flow of educational ideas and practices (Strang & Meyer, 1993, p.487). Many rich social networks in academe are formed around common research interests, graduate school friendships, departmental affiliations, or other such foci. And while the information about teaching that occasionally passes through these networks is helpful, it is often thin: What books have you tried on topic X with introductory students? My student is writing a paper on topic Y: what do you suggest she read?

The scholarship of teaching and learning enriches old networks and builds new ones in two important ways, both of which increase the likelihood of more adventurous pedagogical travel. The “upgraded” knowledge about teaching and learning that participants produce is important. But so too is the fact that those who get involved often redefine themselves in

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1 I apologize in advance for reflections that may seem parochial in their focus on the USA. What one can see of the vast and varied topography across which teaching travels in higher education depends very much, at least initially, on one’s vantage point, in this case, from work at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. I am grateful to my colleagues Molly Breen, Tony Ciccone, and Molly Sutphen for exceptionally helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.
terms of a newly informed professional practice, and get interested not only in what other scholars of teaching and learning have to say, but in a wide range of resources relevant to their pedagogy. As Molly Sutphen points out, “teachers make a key decision when they decide to take their teaching on the road, or when they are willing to be a pedagogical tourist and put up with all the trouble of travel--not fully seeing how a new pedagogy will work—while imagining new experiences with potential for their teaching” (2009). In other words, pedagogical travel requires both the availability of and desire for pedagogical knowledge and colleagues, i.e. supply and demand.

Supply

One of the signature ideas embedded in the scholarship of teaching and learning is the admonition to teachers in higher education to go public with lessons from their pedagogical work. In a brief but powerful article in Change magazine, Lee Shulman (1993) suggested that teaching has low status in the academy because it is typically treated in a way that “removes it from the community of scholars” (p. 6). He offered a threefold prescription. First, teaching in higher education needs to be (re)connected to communities that matter, especially the disciplines. Second, in order to become community property, teaching would have “to be made visible through artifacts that capture its richness and complexity” (pp. 6-7). Finally, instead of relying solely on student evaluations, teaching should be reviewed—and judged—by “communities of peers beyond the office next door” (p. 7).

The scholarship of teaching and learning movement has continued to pay special attention to ways of making teaching more visible for reflection and review. For example, Shulman suggested the “pedagogical colloquium”—an elaborated job talk about teaching “expounding on the design of a course, showing systematically how the course is an act of scholarship in the discipline, and explaining how the course represents the central issues in the discipline and how in its pedagogy it affords students the opportunity to engage in the intellectual and moral work of the discipline” (1993, p. 7). And Shulman’s colleagues in the American Association of Higher Education’s peer review of teaching project explored a menu of other ideas about how to make teaching more public, including teaching circles, reciprocal visits and observations, mentoring, listening to students, course portfolios, and collaborative inquiry (Hutchings, 1996).

Inquiry into student learning soon became another signature of the scholarship of teaching and learning. In “What’s New in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning?” (1999), Hutchings and Shulman added “question-asking, inquiry, and investigation, particularly around issues of student learning” to “being public” as defining features of the enterprise (p.13). While still controversial as a sine qua non among those who emphasize reflection over classroom research, there’s no question that inquiry has opened a new realm of knowledge production to college and university teachers (McKinney, 2007). Ideas that might once have traveled economy class, embedded in anecdotes or teaching tips, could now travel business (or first!) class as elaborated case studies or comparisons of quasi-experimental design. Accounts of classroom practice that might once have focused solely on strategies for teaching could now be deepened and complicated by a close look at student learning as well (Bernstein, Burnett, Goodburn, & Savory, 2006).

With elaborated work like this in mind, scholars of teaching and learning (and their allies) have succeeded in supplementing the growing array of local forums for pedagogical exchange with new opportunities for going public. Many teaching and learning centers, for
example, have sponsored poster sessions and more-or-less formal collections of essays by
campus teaching fellows (e.g. Schroeder & Ciccone, 2004; Rutz & Savina, 2007; Bernstein,
2007). More space has been devoted to teaching and learning in the conferences, journals,
newsletters, and web sites of disciplinary and professional societies. New pedagogical
associations, conferences, and journals (such as IJ-SOTL) have been launched. Clearly,
the Web has made much else possible as well: repositories of classroom activities and
assignments, course syllabi and materials, electronic course portfolios, discussion groups
and blogs, and more (see Iiyoshi & Kumar, 2008).

While many streams of pedagogical inquiry and reflection (including research from
education and other learning sciences) have fed this emergent “teaching commons” (Huber
and Hutchings, 2005), the scholarship of teaching and learning has been an important
addition, bringing with it respect for practitioner inquiry and the value it places on evidence
and artifacts of student learning in the representation and analysis of classroom innovation
and curricular reform. It would be daunting to try to quantify just how much information
about teaching and learning in higher education has been made public (in all the ways that
can mean) in the past five, ten, or twenty years. But does just being “out there” really
make teaching, to use Shulman’s phrase, “community property?” Doesn’t it also need
teachers (present and future) who are willing and able to review, critique, and use it to
inform and improve their own and their colleagues’ pedagogical work?

Demand

It is no simple task to understand the emergence and spread of “demand”—for just about
anything, let alone pedagogical knowledge and especially the kinds of practitioner
knowledge that the scholarship of teaching and learning represents. As anthropologists who
have studied the global movement of commodities point out, one must consider not only
the knowledge necessary for the production of any particular commodity, but the knowledge
that goes into its consumption as well. When social distance between producers and
consumers is great, traders (and a host of other intermediaries) have historically acted as
bridges along which commodities and the knowledge and desire to use them can flow
(Appadurai, 1988). A huge literature on the travel of things and ideas—fashion to food,
medicine to movies, and cricket to Christianity—charts the complicated paths these
innovations take en route to new communities around the world.

Academic exchange works in similar fashion. Circulating among producers with relative ease,
specialized knowledge requires intervention by teachers and other interpreters for audiences
more distant from the source. Popularization remains controversial to many
specialists, who often feel that the transformations in style and content necessary to reach a
wider audience simplify or distort the knowledge in question and lead to the “inappropriate”
consumption of the knowledge they’ve produced. The transformations required to teach
specialized knowledge to undergraduates have been less controversial and textbooks and
guides to teaching specific areas of content (like the Modern Language Association’s series
on “Approaches to Teaching World Literature”) sell well enough.

But few faculty, at least historically, have thought of themselves either as producers or
consumers of scholarly work about teaching and learning. Indeed, staff at the teaching and
learning centers that have been established at many USA colleges and universities over the
past twenty years have served as traders, if you will, attempting to introduce pedagogical
knowledge to local faculty and stimulate demand. The field is not theirs alone, of course, as
other initiatives organized by other leaders both on and off campus (e.g. the various science education programs funded by the National Science Foundation) have also played this mediating role—bringing faculty together around important problems of pedagogy, curricula, assessment, and more.

And this is where those “rich social networks” discussed by Brown and Duguid come into play. As these authors note, it is not the availability of information itself that is key, but participation in communities of practice. “Become a member of a community,” they argue, “engage in its practices, and you can acquire and make use of its knowledge and information” (Brown & Duguid, 2000, p. 126). From this perspective, the key to demand for pedagogical knowledge—including what is produced by practitioners through the scholarship of teaching and learning—is the expansion of communities of practice around teaching and learning itself.

This is exactly what appears to be happening today. We can see in collections of essays like Exploring Signature Pedagogies (Gurung, Chick, & Haynie, 2009) that groups of scholars across the disciplinary spectrum are designing new strategies to help undergraduates experience the habits of mind that characterize expertise in particular fields. The sciences have been particularly energetic (and well-funded) in forming communities of teachers around new approaches to teaching introductory science courses (see Seymour, 2002). Communities have also formed to advance crosscutting goals for general education, such as integrative learning or civic responsibility (see the Association of American Colleges and University’s initiative on Liberal Education & America’s Promise; also, e.g., Smith, Nowacek, & Bernstein, in press).

The scholarship of teaching and learning typically appeals to faculty who have participated in such initiatives and actively promotes exchange between them. For example, the national fellowship program (1998-2006) of the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning provided many opportunities for people from different disciplines, institutions, and (to some extent) countries to learn from each other’s pedagogical projects—and so did the Visible Knowledge Project (Bass & Eynon, 2009), the University of Nebraska’s Peer Review of Teaching Project (Bernstein et al., 2006) and other programs that have engaged growing numbers of teachers in faculty inquiry in recent years (e.g. Cambridge, 2004; Cox & Richlin, 2004; Nelson & Robinson, 2006). A glance at the project histories that Hutchings collected in Opening Lines (1999), or that I documented in Balancing Acts (Huber, 2004), shows how extensively pioneers in the scholarship of teaching and learning relied on the pedagogical and methodological experience of colleagues in a wide range of networks in which they participated. The published literature has been important too, of course, but many of the pathways through which knowledge travels are not reflected in formal publications, which by convention acknowledge only sources appropriate for reference lists.

It is important to recognize that the new knowledge participants gain in such efforts does not usually stop when the project’s work is complete. One hopes, of course, that the knowledge it creates returns to the scholars’ classrooms in the form of new curricula, new assessments and assignments, and new pedagogies, which in turn can become subjects for further inquiry enriched by a wider range of concepts and methods (See The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2008). But the travel of particular interest here is the kind that comes from the exchange of knowledge among teachers. Like the new kinds of knowledge production that characterize “the dynamics of science and research” today, (Gibbons et al, 1994), participants in pedagogical projects focus on solving practical problems and bring their deepening range of experience and understanding—as well as their
growing repertoires of relevant resources and literature—to their next collaborations and other academic networks that they can enrich when questions come up about teaching and learning. Some, of course, become traders themselves, introducing the scholarship of teaching and learning to colleagues at home and abroad (metaphorically as well as literally). In the process of classroom inquiry and innovation, work on collaborative projects, and academic communication more generally, then, the knowledge needed to take an interest in and use pedagogical knowledge, develops, deepens, widens, and grows. It follows that the best way to increase demand is to expand the circle of practitioners who take an interest in and get involved in pedagogical efforts in their discipline, their institution, or around cross-cutting educational means and ends. If there’s a scholarship of teaching and learning component to the enterprise—inquiry into student learning, improvement based on inquiry, going public with reflection and results—then demand and supply should grow together, sparing higher education (let us hope) the “theory/practice” divide that has long impeded travel between education researchers and teachers in primary and secondary schools.

To build a genuine teaching commons in which pedagogical knowledge circulates regularly and widely will take a huge effort. We need to do more to create conditions in colleges and universities that support pedagogical inquiry and innovation. And, in keeping with the travel theme, we need the concerted cultivation of “academic hospitality” in all the varieties that Phipps and Barnett (2007) identify: “celebratory,” keeping the community open to academic newcomers and guests; “communicative,” increasing the number and organization of routes through which concepts travel within and between academic fields and cultures; and “critical,” addressing questions about quality, support, esteem and reward (See also Huber and Hutchings 2005, 118-124). Clearly, the proverbial whole village of higher education must be involved.

But as scholars of teaching and learning continue to initiate and support efforts to widen and intensify faculty engagement with pedagogy, it makes sense to keep an eye on travel. There is a great deal of useful work to be done to document the itineraries and transformations that pedagogical knowledge take as it moves from thought to action, from poster to print, from physics to philosophy, and back again. There’s the challenge of figuring out what kinds of knowledge travel well in what conditions, and even what “traveling well” might mean. Someone might even be moved to figure out how far and how fast such knowledge is traveling—and whether, as it seems, it’s traveling farther and faster today than ever before.

References


