The Carnegie Catalyst: A Case Study in Internationalisation of SoTL

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsotl.2009.030204
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Abstract

Excerpt: While the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching is heralding a new era which will see important advances in primary and secondary education, teachers in higher education are discussing how the inspired work that has marked the past decade will move forward. A golden era has seen the Foundation influence an incalculable number of people, turning the heads and changing the direction of many academic staff in higher education. Teachers have been stimulated to enquire into their own teaching and learning, and to integrate their own research into teaching and learning in more innovative ways. Students have enjoyed the benefits of more engaged and scholarly teachers.

Keywords

Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Irish integrative learning project

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The Carnegie Catalyst: A Case Study in Internationalisation of SoTL

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While the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching is heralding a new era which will see important advances in primary and secondary education, teachers in higher education are discussing how the inspired work that has marked the past decade will move forward. A golden era has seen the Foundation influence an incalculable number of people, turning the heads and changing the direction of many academic staff in higher education. Teachers have been stimulated to enquire into their own teaching and learning, and to integrate their own research into teaching and learning in more innovative ways. Students have enjoyed the benefits of more engaged and scholarly teachers.

Teachers themselves have benefited from their association with the Carnegie Foundation within their own higher education institutions. Collaboration has been seen as prestigious, providing an important international network to draw upon. The name of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching now strikes a chord with senior academic managers, who have previously seen teaching as something that their staff just did without the need for professional support. Matiru et al (1995) highlighted these attitudes which have lingered on into the 21st century when they noted the assumption that the possession of a Ph.D degree is all that an aspiring lecturer needs in order to be able to teach in a University – and that the rest can be imbibed through osmosis.

The CASTL Scholars Experience

The research carried out by senior scholars of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (CFAT), in particular Lee Shulman, Pat Hutchings and Mary Huber, together with their many collaborators, has brought a clarity to the way forward for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in higher education. One initiative, the visionary Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) Scholars program saw 100 scholars supported in their SoTL work between 1998 and 2006. The crucial elements of this initiative were the inspiring residential experiences at the Carnegie Foundation at Stanford.

I had the good fortune to be one of the final cohort of scholars in 2005-2006. The theme of the Academy was Integrative Learning, and built on the work of the national Integrative Learning Project: Opportunities to Connect which had begun in 2003 led by CFAT and the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). I worked with twenty other scholars, gaining insights from stimulating collaborations. We were supported in addressing the puzzles and challenges involved in building students’ capacities for integrative learning, in what I came to call ‘Puzzle-based Learning’.

The senior scholars in CASTL were tireless in addressing meetings and writing supportive documents, helping with policy and practice, and encouraging the scholars. They were both demanding and supportive in all facets of the program. They challenged and they guided. In this way they modelled good teaching. Just like our own students, we were

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inspired by the short master classes, seminars, and case studies, and by working with peers on issues we had ourselves identified as important. Just like our own students we burned the midnight oil writing our reports at the last minute – forgetting to stick to the guidelines – wondering how to work the on-line bit – getting it wrong and asking for help! Social and peer-learning resulted as we were inspired by working together. The Teaching Commons became a reality.

So what did the Carnegie Foundation catalyse? The CASTL scholars were supported to move from dependence to independence. Specifically, they were challenged with a final task that was crucial to the sustainability of SoTL. Scholars were asked ‘How will you implement and grow this work on your own campus? ‘What are your next steps when you return home?’ We made ambitious plans, cognisant of the reality of influencing policy on our home campuses. Then we fledged, like young birds carrying messages across North America. A small number made it across the Atlantic and beyond.

Internationalisation

The Senior Scholars at CASTL recognised the difficult task individual teachers had in influencing policy in their own institutions. They also recognised the growing interest in SoTL around the world. The CASTL Scholars program was followed by The CASTL Campus Leadership program (2007-2009). This was an attempt to bring together people who can facilitate change on individual campuses, and cluster them with other campuses around the world, thus creating networks for stimulus and support. This would help to grow the isolated initiatives into campus-wide practice.

University College Cork Ireland (UCC), applied for, and was accepted into, the Graduate Studies strand of the CASTL Campus Leadership program in 2007. Locally the steering group includes senior academics who are also managers and decision makers of the university: The Dean of Graduate Studies; the Chair of the Graduate Research Group; the Director of Quality Promotion; the current and former Vice Presidents for Teaching and Learning; and the Academic and Programme Coordinators of the Teaching and Learning Centre. This is a group that can influence policy within the institution.

There was no funding attached to this honour, but the status that this collaboration has given us, and the doors that have opened because of it are almost immeasurable. The benefits accrued during this CASTL Campus Leadership project will be the subject of a report at the ISSOTL Conference in Indiana in October 2009. In brief, the presence of Bob Mathieu, Director of the Centre for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (CIRTL), in the Graduate Studies strand inspired UCC to request government funding for a National Academy for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning in Ireland (NAIRTL). This bid was successful in securing 3 million euro, and began an unprecedented level of collaboration within Ireland. This would not have happened unless we had looked beyond the bounds of our own country (Higgs, 2007).

NAIRTL, within its first 2 years, has awarded 102 grants for projects that are encouraging scholarship in teaching and learning. It has published eight books, and numerous reports, which are influencing policy nationally. It is reaching staff who had not before considered their teaching as a scholarly activity. These teachers are formulating research questions, conducting enquiries, and disseminating their findings. The impact on student learning is evident, and is being monitored and evaluated. The boundaries between administrative and academic interests are blurring, with the senior manager of NAIRTL attending the ISSOTL conferences in order to better understand
and support academic staff and students. The National Academy is now being used by the Irish Higher Education Authority to showcase good practice in collaborative strategic initiatives.

**A Case Study: The Irish Integrative Learning Project**

Using the CASTL scholars program as a model, funding was sought from the new National Academy to run the Irish Integrative Learning Project. Involvement with the original CASTL program gave the proposers credibility within their institution. It gave them confidence to invite in colleagues from other institutions, and to give the project a national name. In short it gave the project status. The proposal was awarded funding by NAIRTL, and in 2008 the Irish Integrative Learning Project was born. The project aims to build on the findings of the ‘Integrative Learning Project: Opportunities to Connect’, and on the CASTL Scholars initiative on integrative learning.

There are currently 18 participants, from 3 institutions, forming the core of the Irish Integrative Learning Project (IILP). The participants were chosen for their potential to promote and document integrative learning. The project has a strong staff development focus, and so it was thought important to get a mix of experience within the group. Half of the group have a qualification in teaching and learning in higher education, and the other half have none. This was an opportunity to bring on board staff who were new to the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Our projects are subject-centred, and authentic as advocated by Kreber (2007). Clusters have emerged in Science and Mathematics, Economics and Law, Medicine and Health, and Arts and Social Science. Fifteen courses are the subject of enquiry, and have the potential to impact on close to 1000 students. Sustainability is important, so that what is learned by staff will remain within the institution and benefit future students. To build students’ capacity for integrative learning we aim to help them to develop certain attributes as advocated by Huber and Hutchings (2004). These include developing a sense of purpose that keeps them on track, fitting fragmentary information into a ‘learning framework’, understanding something of their own learning processes, and being self-directed learners with explicit learning goals. The integrative learner will ask probing questions to help achieve learning goals, will monitor and reflect on their own efforts, and make choices that promote learning.

How will this be achieved? Huber and Hutchings (2004) suggest that teachers need to be integrative thinkers themselves, understand something of how students learn, feel comfortable with a range of teaching strategies from which they can draw, and design opportunities for students to connect up their learning. Integrative learning can be articulated as a goal or learning outcome, and assessment methods that encourage integrative thinking and learning can be devised. These attributes of teacher and learner are helpful in mapping out pathways to foster integrative learning. The IILP participants must be willing to take risks with their teaching, try new approaches, and where appropriate stand back and gift the learning to the learner (Malone, 2002, a former CASTL scholar).

Members of the CFAT have synthesised the findings of the ‘Integrative Learning Project: Opportunities to Connect’ in a public report published in late 2006 (Huber, 2006; Hutchings, 2006; Gale 2006; Miller, 2006). This report is providing a major resource for the Irish Integrative Learning Project. The authors have divided their findings into
4 strands that capture the depth and breadth of integrative learning, and have indicated clearly how they believe students’ connection-making can be increased. They have concluded that fostering integrative learning needs attention to curriculum design, pedagogy, assessment and faculty development.

Our findings so far agree that curriculum design can help or hinder integrative learning. Huber (2006, p.2) says “getting everyone to think beyond the level of the course is a challenge” but we must “build links into the regular curriculum, and create opportunities for all students to integrate their learning at multiple points throughout their college careers”. The report makes it clear that curriculum design, at the programme level, is important. Huber advocates starting early, as building capacities to integrate learning takes time. Even at this early stage in the IILP we have evidence that integrative initiatives can influence retention in the first year of undergraduate study.

The IILP participants are using pedagogies known to provide rich opportunities for integrative learning such as problem-based learning, seminars, learning communities, and building e-portfolios. Using one or more of these pedagogies to design a module, or a whole programme, that is integrating pedagogies, is advocated by Gale (2006) and Hutchings (2006).

Miller (2006) reports on innovative assessment practices which encourage students to connect-up their learning. In these examples learning outcomes, assessment and teaching strategies are aligned to promote integrative learning. Some participants in the IILP are simply asking their students to articulate their connection-making within or between disciplines, while others are seeking new holistic understandings, often via student reflective portfolios.

For students to engage in integrative learning, their teachers must model this form of learning themselves. To address the concerns of Hutchings (2006) that staff development is needed, the IILP places an emphasis on collaborative group work that assists participants to develop a toolkit of teaching strategies for integrative teaching. Hutchings (2006) reports that mechanisms for knowing how well students connect ideas within the discipline or across fields, between curriculum and co-curriculum, or between academic work and engagement with social and community issues are not well developed. Miller (2006) advocates making high quality examples of students’ integrative work public, so that staff can be kept in touch with what is expected, and build understanding of how it can be developed. This documentation is a primary aim of the IILP. Hutchings draws a persuasive picture of ‘developed’ staff helping students to map out connections between cross-cutting literacies.

One aspect of the CASTL Scholars program that informed our work, and proved particularly powerful is the critical friends approach to staff development. This has helped participants to examine their work from another perspective, and to receive critique from a colleague who is an advocate for the success of their work. Participants were not only appreciative of the insights of their critical friend, but reported that being a critical friend was a useful learning experience.

The IILP participants are helping to move the theoretical debate forward. Carl Weimann, a nobel laureate, and Carnegie Foundation US University Professor of the Year in 2004, stressed the importance of advances in neuroscience to our understanding of how learning takes place, at his address to faculty in Dublin on May 18th 2009 (Weimann, 2009). If every act causes neuronal connections to be made (Greenfield, 2004), and learning is a physical process, it suggests that all learning is integrative. This challenges
the IILP group to think about what it is we are striving for in our project. To help with this debate Brendan Hall from the Centre for Excellence in Active Learning, University of Gloucestershire, UK, was enlisted as an associate member of the IILP, and led a discussion on the idea that there are threshold concepts within each discipline. These concepts are integrative, in that once grasped they transform the learners’ understanding, and help them to move from novice to expert (Meyer and Land, 2006a, b). Here we have help for the thinly stretched academic teacher. The idea of threshold concepts brings the discipline back into centre stage in the teaching and learning debate. It is the disciplinarian who is expert and can articulate these key concepts, and design assessment and teaching strategies to help students master them. These ideas are helping to focus the work of the IILP participants.

Participants report that this project provides a comfortable space for sharing ideas on scholarship and student learning that were central to their interests. They report being better informed and more intentional about helping to build student attributes that promote integrative learning. They are being encouraged to consider outputs and outcomes, and articulate potential short-term and long-term impacts on student and peer learning. Already several outputs have been achieved by individual or groups in the form of reports, articles, seminars for colleagues, and conference presentations and publications.

An important outcome is emerging from some participants involved in interdisciplinary programmes. After assessing students for connection-making they are surprised by the findings of their own research. They discovered that integrated programmes do not in themselves lead to integrative learning. That is, assumptions that students will make meaningful connections unaided may not be well-founded. Separately delivered and assessed modules may be seen by students as parallel and unconnected. Such realisations empower teachers to become more intentional in their teaching to help students connect-up their learning. They suggest that we are deepening our understanding of how students learn.

The work of the participants is beginning to influence the wider community. For example, integrative learning is being articulated in programme or module learning outcomes. Teachers are discussing the implications of integrative learning on their blogs. Postgraduate teaching assistants are reporting that their students require assistance to make connections between their courses.

Further international collaboration is crucial to enhance and sustain our SoTL endeavours. While in the Carnegie Foundation, in 2005, I googled ‘Integrative Learning’ only to find that a close neighbour, England, had just funded a Centre for Excellence in Integrative Learning at the University of Nottingham. Although only a short flight from Cork, it was not until the ISSOTL conference in Edmonton in Oct 2008, that I met the Co-Director of this Centre, Alan Booth. He was immediately enlisted as an associate member of the IILP. He visited UCC in 2009 to continue his own research into how disciplinarians perceive integrative learning. During this visit he assisted in evaluating the Irish Integrative Learning Project, and presented valuable critique. He uncovered the vulnerability that academics can feel when trying to promote new ways of teaching within their own discipline. He suggested practical pointers for staff development aimed at bringing evidence-based disciplinary projects to fruition. This collaboration is leading to an international conference on Integrative Learning, to be held in 2010, at which all participants will be invited to disseminate their research findings.
In Conclusion

An important message that is, I hope, coming across loud and clear in this invited essay is that working with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has been the catalyst for many of the SoTL initiatives that currently take place in University College Cork, Ireland. Without involvement in the CASTL Scholars and CASTL Campus Leadership programs, the NAIRTL initiative, and the Irish Integrative Learning Project would not have come into being. The total impact on staff and students of these initiatives goes well beyond that reported here. The IILP was only one of 102 projects funded by NAIRTL. The experience of this one campus has been repeated many times over. There are tens of thousands of projects around the world that have been inspired by, or helped in some way, by the work of the Carnegie Foundation. As a result, SoTL in Higher Education will continue to move forward, and benefit from internationalisation.

It is time to ask that crucial question once again – ‘what are the next steps?’ In the uncertain future, all staff can engage and be scholarly in their approach to teaching and learning, but not all can dedicate their prime time to SoTL. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning will only continue if students have richer learning experiences, and teachers are enthused and excited, refreshed and renewed by their involvement in SoTL. So, like Huber and Hutchings, we must catalyse and encourage teachers into the ‘big tent’ of SoTL, by valuing modest small scale efforts aimed at reflecting on one’s own classroom teaching, and sharing what is learned. In the more established disciplines, many broad theoretical underpinnings have often emerged from small-scale early ‘field’ work. With this approach we can respect our colleagues, and support each other in moving to our own positions along the spectrum of scholarship, in relation to teaching and learning.

References


