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SoTL Commons Conference: A Spirit of Inquiry

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Abstract

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Keywords

SoTL Commons Conference

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SoTL Commons Conference: A Spirit of Inquiry

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In March 2009 the SoTL Commons Conference at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, Georgia (USA) was attended by many faculty members from across the globe. Three faculty members were invited to share both professional and personal perspectives about the conference. In this essay, we will talk about our experiences, the role and meaning of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), and final impressions from the conference.

The SoTL Commons Conference was dedicated to the continuous improvement of the teaching and learning process. This year the conference was from Tuesday, March 10 to Friday, March 13. Dozens of presentations were given regarding various SoTL projects that covered many disciplines and practice settings. These presentations ranged from the use of online tools to effective use of evaluation.

Many attendees arrived through the Savannah/Hilton Head International airport. This airport is only 20 minutes away from the beautiful and historic city of Savannah. After a drive through the countryside, one would arrive at the burgeoning city of Statesboro. Statesboro continues to maintain its natural beauty including the Raptor Center (for predatory birds) and a botanical garden at Georgia Southern. The city itself possesses parks, cultural activities, and community events. Georgia Southern University is a growing institution in both enrollment and stature. As a Carnegie Doctoral Institution, Georgia Southern is striving to bring even more to the scholarly and economic community.

Our Experiences

As the conference began, we were excited at the opportunity to meet our colleagues from across the United States and around the world. With over 90 concurrent sessions and 20 posters, we could select presentations ranging from classroom assessment to implementation of specific classroom activities. In addition, sessions focused on how to design SoTL activities to measure student learning in the classroom.

At the beginning of each session, a session chair introduced the speakers. We were impressed with the diverse backgrounds of the speakers who provided us with insight into how they incorporated SoTL into their scholarly work. Many of the speakers shared specific ideas that we can use in our classrooms to improve student learning.

Maggie's Experiences

When walking into the conference center, I could sense the excitement of everyone there. They were smiling and welcomed me into their conversations. I saw colleagues I knew from other departments at Georgia Southern University, as well as new friends I would meet during the conference.

With a research interest in development and measurement of learning outcomes, I choose sessions that focused on topics related to my current and future teaching practice. I also chose sessions that would advance my understanding and ability to implement SoTL in the classroom. The sessions I attended ranged from Implementing Web 2.0, to cultural diversity in the classroom, to measuring student attitudes and behavior in the classroom. I came away with many activities that I plan to implement in my classes in the future.

During these sessions, I made many notes and took advantage of any handouts the presenters shared with us. I found myself wishing that many of the presenters had more time to share their work with us. I also did not want to leave to go to the next session due to the dynamic nature of the discussions that were initiated as a result of the presentation. Everyone in attendance shared their thoughts about the presenter's work. These sessions were like opening a treasure chest and finding nuggets of gold to take with you.

Debbie Allen and I presented a concurrent session about our experiences designing a Global Nursing Concepts course called *The Others: Cultural Competency in Nursing Education*. We shared the data that we had gathered from both standardized testing as well as reports to support the need for this course due to our nursing students' lack of cultural awareness. The cultural competency model and course design were discussed as well as our plans to gather qualitative and quantitative data measuring the degree of change in cultural awareness and competency in students who participated in this class. During the session, several attendees asked questions and provided suggestions to improve the course design and ideas for additional SoTL projects for the future.

ideas for further development of this course. With the initial call for abstracts for presentations and posters, the process of becoming a presenter at the conference was easy to navigate. We were concerned at first that our work may not be developed enough to present at the conference, but we felt we had important information to share with our colleagues. With this conference, beginning and experienced researchers of SoTL can feel confident that their work will be valued and accepted by their colleagues.

A few weeks after we submitted the abstract, we received an acceptance notice via e-mail for our presentation. We also received regular communication from the conference organizers to let us know what materials were required from us and deadlines for submission. I would encourage any faculty member who is engaged in a SoTL project to consider submitting an abstract for the next conference. It is a wonderful opportunity to disseminate your work as well as learn about the work of others.

Another of the exciting benefits from attending the sessions was that I found opportunities to collaborate in the future with colleagues on SoTL projects which would have never appeared if I had not attended the conference. I purchased several books on teaching and learning at the conference as well as taking copies of several articles on SoTL that were available to attendees. I look forward to continuing to learn more about SoTL through reading these articles and books.

Kera's Experiences

In keeping with the spirit of the SOTL community, I invited a SoTL participant who was a former professor of mine to give a lecture to one of my classes before the conference. After the lecture and a tour around my office, I took him to the Nessmith-Lane Education Building where we were the first to arrive. We were met at the registration table with our pick of T-shirts along with our conference packages. Our picture was taken to commemorate the opening of the conference since we were the first to arrive.

After a few minutes of conversation, the first shuttle pulled up to the front. There were so many people eager to meet us as they walked through the doors of the conference center. I was overwhelmed with the friendliness of people from many countries - including some who did not expect Statesboro to be so warm!

My responsibility as a faculty member does not stop because there is a conference going on! I woke up in the wee hours of the morning to create a perfect exam for my students. I want students to feel good about the things they learn... and I want to make sure they

learn it, which is the reason I am at the conference!

There are so many people here! I was amazed at all the people from different countries, but I was also as amazed at the number of schools right here in Georgia - I met people from Georgia Southern University, Georgia College & State University, University of Georgia, and Georgia Highlands College. I look forward to finding colleagues who are right here in this incredible state.

A diverse range of widely applicable topics was discussed at the conference. For example, one of the early sessions (*Comparing Approaches to Wiki Assessment*) dealt with how to use wikis effectively in collaborative coursework. The wiki is a website that can be edited by any user. This allows students to collaborate easily on team homework or projects. This type of study is truly multidisciplinary and can be applied in either liberal arts or engineering.

Another session (*Improving Academic Quality through Outcomes Assessment and Active Learning Strategies*) discussed how to implement institutional change through assessment and its key factors. Specifically, this talk dealt with Title III funding as the institution improved its use of active learning. "Turabian - Isn't That a Hat?: Increasing Information Competency of Students" focused on improving student information competencies through a Quality Enhancement Plan.

The information skills included writing skills, proper formatting, and appropriate use of sources. An assessment instrument was created for entering students, and a goal was set of 5% improvement per year for student information competency assessments. Various teaching methods (tutorials and librarian-given lessons) were employed to work towards this goal.

"Are Some Students Better Suited for Online Class and Others Better Suited for In-class?" dealt with the effectiveness of online classes for specific learning styles (Felder/Solomon Index of Learning Styles) and levels (Blooms Taxonomy). The current research finds no indication that the different learning styles perform better or worse in online classes. Also, at most levels of learning, online classes perform equally well. However, at the highest tested level of learning (synthesis), in-class students have a statistically significant performance advantage. These are just a few examples of multidisciplinary research that can help in all areas of teaching.

Debbie's Experiences

I was proud to be a part of the SoTL conference this year. I was able to interact with other faculty members from around the world and discovered we have very similar problems and/or successes. During this conference, I had the opportunity to discuss issues during sessions as well as on our breaks. I found that in this informal setting, faculty members are more open to suggestions and to discussing pertinent issues. I found myself proud to be an

employee at Georgia Southern that was hosting this event.

In addition, to attending the SoTL conference, I presented with my colleagues at three different concurrent sessions. The first session was a presentation about *Perceptions of Disruptive Classroom Behaviors* with four of my colleagues at Georgia Southern. I enjoyed presenting on this topic because the issue of

disruptive classroom behaviors affects the quality of the learning experience for all students and faculty. I also presented with Maggie on cultural competency in nursing education. Finally, I presented with five other colleagues about *Faculty and Student Perceptions of Post-Exam Attendance*.

As a presenter, I was able to share my experiences with the SoTL. Because I have participated in several SoTL projects in the past two years, I have gained an appreciation of how important this work is for measuring learning outcomes and providing evidence to support my teaching effectiveness. I also enjoyed the opportunity to hear the thoughts of the attendees who came to the presentations. This type of feedback is vital in continuing to develop SoTL at Georgia Southern and across the world.

Role and Meaning of SoTL

According to Dr. Alan Altany (Conference Chair), the spirit of the SoTL Commons Conference is to engage in inquiry about the scholarship of teaching and learning as well as how this scholarship can be applied in our classrooms to improve teaching and enhance student learning. From the concurrent sessions, posters, and the keynote addresses each day, this spirit was clearly displayed by all attendees.

At every nook and cranny at the conference center, you could see colleagues from across the globe discussing their experiences with SoTL. These lively discussions served as nourishment to the spirit and soul of SoTL. Consistent with this spirit, we were engaged and learning from each other. Every attendee became both a teacher and a student.

In addition, we found the spirit of SoTL evident through the interaction of colleagues with varying degrees of experience in the application of the scholarship of teaching and learning in their practice. The many

concurrent sessions allowed attendees to choose sessions which reflected not only their interests, but also allowed them to learn about application of SoTL to their classes.

Final Thoughts

While we each attended different sessions, we found that all of the sessions allowed us to engage in collegial discussion with the speakers and other attendees. We definitely felt that these discussions were the best part of the conference. We found that no matter the setting, we all had many more things in common than we did differences.

Throughout the SoTL Commons Conference, laughter, friendship, and ideas were freely shared. We found the conference to be a rich environment where colleagues could engage in discussions about SoTL no matter their experience, area of practice, or setting. Across state lines and countries, we found attendees engaged in a spirit of inquiry about SoTL and application of SoTL into their scholarship practice. Without a doubt, the spirit of SoTL flourished during this conference.