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Personal Reflection: Playing for SoTL Impact: A Personal Reflection

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Abstract

Excerpt: SoTL scholars (for example, Poole, 2009; Weston, Berthiaume, Matsushita, Tovar, & Timmermans, 2008) have found using a lens of micro-meso-macro to represent individual, departmental/institutional and national/disciplinary/interdisciplinary impacts to be helpful in considering SoTL work at various levels and where there might be unexplored opportunities.

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Playing for SoTL Impact: A Personal Reflection

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SoTL scholars (for example, Poole, 2009; Weston, Berthiaume, Matsushita, Tovar, & Timmermans, 2008) have found using a lens of *micro-meso-macro* to represent individual, departmental/institutional and national/disciplinary/interdisciplinary impacts to be helpful in considering SoTL work at various levels and where there might be unexplored opportunities.

There is no question in my mind that this is a useful framework, and it is one I promote (see, for example, Simmons & Taylor, 2009) as a conceptual organizer for our work. I see it as having the distinct advantage of being suitable for any person or group, and one that can be entered at any level and fits any setting. It also allows me to consider SoTL from the perspectives of the multiple hats I wear.

For example, I am a researcher, exploring the ways in which SoTL scholars, often with few supports and little training in this kind of research, develop a personal/professional identity and the supports and challenges to that identity formation. I am also in a relatively new role at the University of Waterloo where I am responsible for supporting and growing the scholarship of teaching and learning at the university. I ponder how I take the fantastic work that is being done by our individual faculty members and staff and support that through departments and across the institution. As a board member of the Society for Teaching and Learning Higher Education (STLHE) and Vice-President, SoTL portfolio, I must also think about ways of moving SoTL forward at the national level and beyond. These roles are both separate and aligned, and often create a wonderful synergy.

Recently at the University of Waterloo, we held our first annual SoTL conference, entitled *Opportunities and New Directions*. Gary Poole delivered the keynote address (Poole, 2009) and over 40 SoTL researchers from Waterloo and across Canada presented in roundtables, 25-minute, and 90-minute formats over the full-day event. The closing panel was framed to mirror the micro, or individual impact; meso, or department and institutional impact; and macro, or national impact and beyond. Dr. Marlee Spafford spoke about the ways her research and therefore, promotion and tenure submissions, have focused on her SoTL work in optometry - a science-related discipline, and a professional school as well. I was there to talk about what we had done at the institutional level, and Dr. Ken Meadows, the managing editor of the soon to be released *Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, was there to encourage submissions for a broader impact for Canadian SoTL work.

In that talk, I offered an analogy for thinking about how I might support work moving forward at the institutional level. I had been thinking quite a lot about impact, and I spoke of playing squash recently (or, as I told the audience, practicing squash; I'm not nearly good enough to actually play!). I'm quite strategic about my practice: I warm up a bit and then take some long shots - the resounding thwack of ball on racket and the satisfying thunk of ball on the court walls makes me feel like I'm really playing - I even sound like I know what I'm doing. These long shots, no matter how hard, give me lots of time to move into place and return them; they may not always be easy volleys, but one can see them coming. In our institutional SoTL work at Waterloo we have quite a few of these long shots

in play, shots with lots of time, high impact, and clear and immediate evidence of success. We have, for example, a Teaching-Based Research Group (T-BRG) consisting of past grant winners and any others interested in SoTL work. We run workshops for that group about research methods, data analysis, literature reviews, and have seen an increase in interest and membership over the last year. Our conference grew out of the work and feedback from that group, and we welcomed nearly 120 participants (about two thirds from our institution, the rest from across Canada) to that event. Similarly, the SLTHE Board has a number of high impact long shots: we will soon release the CJ-SoTL journal, we are in the final stages of forming a national SoTL Advisory Board, we continue to explore partnerships with other like-minded organizations, and our annual conference in June of each year sees a continual increase in SoTL sessions.

Short shots are a different part of the game. Short shots are those tricky corner shots where the ball is just tipped into the wall. They're the low and up-close shots a player barely has time to see, let alone return. They're much more difficult to anticipate, but they're the ones I work on most, as in the end, I think they're the ones that win the game. I started reflecting on what those short shots would be in my SoTL work at Waterloo and with STLHE - those actions that in the end might have greater impact, but be easy to forget to do. When I frame it in this way, I see the importance of one-on-one (and often casual) conversations with those conducting SoTL research, and responding by email to address their just-in-time research questions. I see the importance of forwarding calls for papers and interesting references to others. I see that what feel like small efforts of paying attention to individual's research goals so I can connect them to like-minded others can have significant impact. A conference breakfast spent meeting someone new who is interested in SoTL work may seem insignificant on the day, but experience has shown me that the long-term impact can be enormous.

It is relatively easy to focus on the longer and seemingly higher impact shots: their effect is easier to discern, and they tend to catch people's attention. They go a long way in furthering the SoTL agenda, no question. I can also see how easy it would be to focus all efforts on them and perhaps, by comparison, neglect the other seemingly lower impact interactions. In the end, however, I still believe the short shots will win the game.

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