Personal Reflection: SoTL and Don't Perish!

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Abstract

This reflection describes my early encounters with SoTL as I went through a critical period questioning my role and responsibilities as an academic and my journey with a cohort of students who made me realise that there is indeed a dire need for SoTL to bridge the nexus between a university academic's teaching responsibilities as well as the global 'publish or perish' pressure most academics experience today

Keywords

Blogs, Scholarship of teaching and learning, Higher education, Web 2.0

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Abstract
This reflection describes my early encounters with SoTL as I went through a critical period questioning my role and responsibilities as an academic and my journey with a cohort of students who made me realise that there is indeed a dire need for SoTL to bridge the nexus between a university academic's teaching responsibilities as well as the global 'publish or perish' pressure most academics experience today.

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Since completing my undergraduate degree, I have been an academic at the tertiary level for slightly over a decade. I have always enjoyed teaching, relating to my students always with the desire to ensure that they learn about learning, apart from the course content *per se*. During my undergraduate and postgraduate studies in Malaysia and Australia, I have been fortunate to have experienced a mixture of both conventional classroom-based as well as state-of-the-art flexible learning environments. Putting state-of-the-art technologies aside, it was my lecturers' teaching philosophy, approaches and constant reflection of our learning processes and capability development that have left an indelible mark on me and my teaching practice. As opposed to the Malaysian education system then which was very much teacher-centred (Neo, 2005; Ng, Kamariah Abu Bakar, Samsilah Roslan, Wong, & Petri Zabariah Megat Abd Rahman, 2005), I found the learner-centered education approach in Australia placed me in control of my own learning development, thereby allowing me to study at my own pace – spending more time on the more difficult topics or those that were of particular interest to me.

In my tenth year of tertiary-level teaching, I took up a position at my present university which was in the midst of repositioning itself to become a research-intensive university, just like many similar institutions in Malaysia and across the world. We had numerous briefings, meetings and retreats to come up with ways to improve the university's research profile and were tasked to develop a university-wide 'research roadmap' that would chart our research endeavours in the years to come. Amidst all these 'research-centred' activities, there was growing concern over the seeming 'relegation' of our teaching activities, especially among academics who enjoyed their teaching roles and were keen on the scholarship of teaching and learning. I was one of them and was at the crossroads – contemplating leaving the university sector for a more teaching-oriented position since with the amount of effort given to my classes, I would have very little time for my research and publishing activities.

Coupled with all these administrative issues, I was assigned to teach two new undergraduate classes which were database and systems analysis, and organisational behaviour (OB) for knowledge management. The latter proved to be a challenge for me as I had a small cohort of students whom, according to fellow colleagues, did not seem to respond positively to the course content which is mainly theoretical in nature, with close to one half of the class taking this course for the second time! With knowledge of the background and history of my OB students, I examined the course content and scrutinized the assessment items and teaching methods employed. The assessment is composed of a written assignment, a mid-term test and a final examination.

My initial conversations with some of the students repeating this course and those who had completed it revealed that they were overwhelmed by the amount of reading, especially the many models and theories that they were expected to remember in order to successfully complete the assessment items. They commented on the 'dryness' of the content which made it difficult for them to link to the world around them and analyse course material. Many of the repeaters were pessimistic of their chances to successfully complete the course, more often than not stating that they are not 'bookish' enough to scrape through it.

The general feeling I had for my students' prospects in getting a good grade was not good. Therefore I wanted to find a way to ensure that my students enjoyed the course, were able to relate to the 'dry' and 'bookish' material and also pick up some additional skills along the way to provide them with a reason to complete the course (Brickman, Gormally, Armstrong, & Hallar, 2009; Justice, Rice, & Warry, 2009). In short, I needed to give the course a complete makeover to appeal to this cohort of students who are WWW savvy, outspoken and creative.

I remember reading about the experiences of academics experimenting with innovative pedagogies and technologies with the use of blogs and other Web 2.0 applications (Yang, 2009). After locating articles on the use of blogs in classrooms in several education journals and magazines, I decided that this is the 'makeover' I needed to accomplish for this course and hence piloted an assignment which required students to develop a personal weblog (blog) and to present their responses to my assignment questions on the blog. Another realization that struck me is that the teaching process opens up avenues for potential research output such as had benefited the authors of these articles which I had earlier consulted.

Each blog posting had three sections – a definition/explanation component, real-life personal example and personal reflection. More importantly, the assignment required them to link the OB theories to real-life, personal-level examples. When asked to write on leadership, they are not allowed to present examples of Donald Trump who everyone knows from the media, but people who are accessible to them, those around them – their parents, neighbours, or friends – in applying the theories and models. This came as a surprise to many students who never actually thought that their mother could actually be used as an example for their OB assignment!

Another common complaint that academics have is the lack of interaction among students and the issue of knowledge hoarding in Asian cultures (Ting & Majid, 2007). The overly competitive nature of students in classes makes knowledge sharing

minimal and most of their assessments relatively 'private' pieces of work that is neither seen nor commented upon by their peers (Ting & Majid, 2007). By posting their assignment solutions on their blogs, it is no longer "private" as the entire class is able to access it and students are required to post critical comments on each other's blog postings. The blog owner would then need to respond to the comments made and has the option to post a revised blog posting after taking into consideration the comments received.

Getting the ball rolling was not easy as this was their first experience in providing and receiving feedback online. After some time, everyone started to comment on each other's work, relating to the examples and, more importantly, the OB theories discussed which allowed them to collectively improve their assignment with very minimal intervention on my part. I was amazed at the progress the class made from their initial blog postings. Students were able to share knowledge on the content, discuss examples from various perspectives, relate it to themselves through reflection, enhance their Internet literacy and master new Web 2.0 skills such as embedding YouTube clips and other controls on their blogs.

When sharing my joy with my colleagues regarding the marked improvements by students in this class, the question that one of them posed was 'Would they pass the final examinations?'. There is no doubt that they are enjoying the class now, but could they master the skills and knowledge required in the exam? My discussions with a few students reveal that after completing the assignments, they are now able to see the practical nature of OB, and that it can be easily related to their surrounding environment. When asked if they would pass the course, most of them gave me a glaring look and said 'Of course!'. And they did, as the final results for the course were good and no one failed (including the final examination component!). Reflecting on the learning process itself for the class, I was able to observe improvements in their self confidence, inquisitiveness and critical thinking skills.

Improving the student learning outcomes in this course has given me renewed hope and mission in my career. I am able to see clearly how SoTL and research publications can work hand-in-hand in complementarity as opposed to the earlier perceptions of having to focus on one or the other. As such, despite pressures on academics to 'publish or perish' in most universities these days, academics can stay true to their first love of teaching which would in turn reward them with publication opportunities. By advocating and advancing SoTL, we academics can enjoy what we love most in our careers – teaching - and of course publish and remain 'non-perishable' with these publications! After receiving course results, the students to thanked me for taking the effort to assist them with the course. In retrospect, I believe that it is I who should be thanking them since now I understand how SoTL fits into the bigger picture and that I could be a university academic active in this field without having to sacrifice what I enjoy most – teaching!

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