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Over the past two decades the surge in interest and activity in SoTL within the academy has happened alongside, but largely disconnected from, a corresponding, largely externally dictated, increase in the importance and expectations of various dimensions of quality agendas. The separation is not hard to understand. SoTL is primarily driven by intrinsic motivation, the desire of practitioners, often individually, to understand and resolve issues and problems. In contrast, quality agendas are often seen as external and extrinsic, although issues such as academic standards and the quality of the learning experience of students feature prominently as intrinsic motivations of faculty. The paper argues that there could be benefits from greater efforts to seek connections between SoTL and quality agendas, whilst acknowledging underlying sensitivities and suspicions of many faculty. Ways of reconciling tensions are explored.

## **Keywords**

SoTL

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## SoTL and the Quality Agenda

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### Abstract

Over the past two decades the surge in interest and activity in SoTL within the academy has happened alongside, but largely disconnected from, a corresponding, largely externally dictated, increase in the importance and expectations of various dimensions of quality agendas. The separation is not hard to understand. SoTL is primarily driven by intrinsic motivation, the desire of practitioners, often individually, to understand and resolve issues and problems. In contrast, quality agendas are often seen as external and extrinsic, although issues such as academic standards and the quality of the learning experience of students feature prominently as intrinsic motivations of faculty. The paper argues that there could be benefits from greater efforts to seek connections between SoTL and quality agendas, whilst acknowledging underlying sensitivities and suspicions of many faculty. Ways of reconciling tensions are explored.

### SoTL and Intrinsic Motivation

Whilst enquiry into pedagogy in higher education dates back decades, sustained and increasingly systematic interest is a much more recent phenomenon. It is also one in which practice and policy have interwoven as for example D'Andrea and Gosling (2005) articulate in the British context.

As Gordon et al (2003) reported, in the 1990s in the UK distinctions were drawn between pedagogical research (Ped R) and pedagogical development (Ped D). Contemporaneously the American scene adopted and adapted the terminology floated by Boyer (1990, 1994) of the scholarship of teaching, extending the phrase to explicitly incorporate learning, and distinguishing SoTL from scholarly teaching (Rice 1992). Subsequently SoTL has become the commonly accepted term worldwide.

The spectacular growth and success of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL, <http://www.issotl.org/>) is testimony to the widespread expansion of activity in this area of scholarly endeavour. Of course, given the huge number of faculty worldwide, the participation rate is still, in truth, comparatively modest. Moreover, it remains difficult to capture accurately the total scale of involvement given an absence of universal metrics to record and quantify this area of scholarly output. Nonetheless it can be safely argued that there has been a substantial increase in scholarly output on teaching and learning, a diversification of fields of interest and of approaches to studies. Communities of interest have mushroomed locally (within institutions), regionally, nationally, internationally and within disciplines. Shared languages and perspectives have developed.

Whilst the reasons for undertaking SoTL were never singular, solely an individual wanting to address or investigate an issue or resolve a problem, although that was, and continues to be a powerful motivator, the principal driver continues to be intrinsic curiosity rather than extrinsic or external imperatives.

## The Quality Agenda

Some might question whether there is a singular quality agenda. The author inclines to the view that commonly there are multiple purposes subsumed within any operational quality agenda. For the purposes of this discussion attention primarily focuses upon interest in the quality of educational provision, of teaching and learning, academic standards and the learning experience of students.

External evaluation of educational provision in higher education has a lengthy pedigree notably at institutional level in the shape of regional accreditation in the USA and at discipline level via the work of various professional bodies, both statutory and voluntary. Within the past two decades institutions in most countries have become subject to cyclical externally-directed peer-based and publicly reported reviews of their quality assurance of educational provision. National agencies collaborate, sharing perspectives on issues, approaches and lacunae. Moreover, the publicly available reports are now readily accessible via websites.

The relevant inter-agency international network (INQAAHE) is well-established and regional versions have emerged. Internationalisation is perceived as a motor for further inter-agency collaboration and a source of pressure for greater commonality in approaches, thematic coverage, criteria, outcomes and forms of report. In 2009 the European inter-agency body (ENQA) produced the third edition of *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Education Area*.

Such alignment might be an anticipated outcome of the Bologna process in Europe but it also touches upon a major area of contention in relation to externally directed quality agenda, namely the perceived intrusion into academic autonomy (individual, departmental, institutional, even national higher education sector). Contestation flourishes in the literature and is aired in policy debates. At least in part shifts in approach in various countries have been a response to such arguments, debates and pressures, although the situation is complicated by the fact that the academy is not the sole, or even necessarily, the dominant voice in such discussions. In many countries governmental priorities and perspectives exercise considerable influence, be these concerns about standards, evidence of effectiveness, the role of specific stakeholders such as students and/or employers, or the weighting of various purposes of higher education (as in the current emphasis in most countries upon graduate employability). Discussion and speculation continues about the future of quality assurances (Newton and Brown 2009). That edited volume considered questions such as the information about quality needed by various stakeholders, the best ways to obtain verified information, who should determine quality and the place of peer review in an age of league tables and commercial guides.

Baird and Gordon (2009a) outlined a framework for evaluating improvements to the student experience which included a grid on to which coaching, umpiring and facilities improvements could be mapped against strategies for risk avoidance, normative quality assurance or quality enhancement (risk taking). The authors illustrated the framework by reference to case studies of quality enhancement, transnational education and research degree candidates and concluded that it was relatively straightforward to categorise the components and to place them within a risk avoidance → risk taking spectrum. They saw the framework as a tool for reflective discussion, especially within institutions.

## **Potential interconnections**

At the outset it must be stressed that it is not being suggested that SoTL and the quality agenda are synonymous. That said, D'Andrea and Gosling (2005) argued that SoTL offered a lever for change. A significant component of that claim rested on what might be termed the "upscaling" of SoTL, national or institutional or through disciplinary networks.

A national opportunity would seem to be provided by the fact that quality agendas for teaching and learning place considerable emphasis upon evidence-based self-assessments/reflective analyses. The credibility of such documents is heightened both by the commitment to reflection and the quality of the evidence adduced. The wider and deeper that trawl the greater the likelihood the reviewers believe there is widespread commitment to policies and strategies and to reflective practice. Of course, that does not require the publication of such evidence in scholarly journals although that does add the recognition that the work satisfied scholarly standards in terms of rigour and grounded argumentation.

One example of focused reflection might be institutional use of the student experience framework articulated by Baird and Gordon (2009a). Here the contribution of SoTL could be providing evidence of effective approaches to a wide range of issues and challenges such as assessment (formative or summative), or curriculum development, the use of learning portfolios, the nurturing of peer learning communities, use of IT to support learning, strategies targetted at specific learner needs, efforts to promote intercultural understanding, or smoothing transitions into the first and later years of study.

The challenge is now not the absence of information but the fragmented nature of the database of knowledge. There is a pressing need for attention to be given to the marshalling and regular updating of SoTL evidence under various headings and categories. A related challenge is moving to a position where interrogating such databases are a natural part of good academic practice by all practitioners.

A good starting point, certainly a pragmatic one, is to make full use of "natural" foci such as academic disciplines or topical issues e.g. assessment or feedback or effective use of IT or successful ways of sustaining widened participation.

In truth the range and quality of SoTL output varies across disciplines, countries and topics but the rate of growth over the past decade means there is a substantial pool of material which probably could be used to much greater effect. SoTL repositories, abstracts, alerts and thematic overviews could all assist connection to the quality agenda through easier access to evidence and investigations, whether the search is at the level of a discipline or across a whole institution. Indeed, sector-wide research evidence would be useful as an input into policy debates.

The quality agenda and SoTL share an interest in promoting good practice, fostering enhancement and encouraging reflection. Over the past decade or so one of the successes of SoTL has been the emergence of networks of practitioners within institutions, in disciplines and on a regional, national and international scale. On the other side of the coin quality assurance approaches expect reflection, the sharing of good practice and active engagement of practitioners. Typical underpinning quality assurance questions are:

Why do you do it that way?  
How do you know it works?  
Why do you think that is the best way?

Many national quality agencies distil good practice messages from reviews either in reports (e.g. QAA in the UK on lessons from the Scottish sector 2007) or by a dedicated website (AUQA). Many published quality reviews, programme or institutional, urge the sharing of good practice.

The tone shifts when quality enhancement features prominently in the external process. In Scotland the process is called Enhancement-Led Institutional Review. It combines scrutiny of assurance and enhancement and explicitly expects institutions to strategically address both components.

So there could be avenues for alignment between effective SoTL and good practice in quality assurance and enhancement. Indeed a good deal that is taking place, in the view of the author, demonstrates such alignment, although the link may not be explicit i.e. SoTL work is not deliberately aimed at addressing aspects of the quality agenda although it may be consciously trying to influence good practice, promote enhancement of the student learning experience and/or demonstrate effective motivation and intervention.

Does that matter? The answer may depend upon the perspective, roles and identity of the respondent. In systems which expect explicit institutional strategies for enhancement the answer is likely to be affirmative. Arguably that is true in all systems since the reflective analysis, institutional or programmatic, needs to provide evidence of evaluation and motivation and demonstrate benchmarking of practice and standards. Certainly that applies to anyone accepting a collective responsibility for the quality of provision, within a programme or an institution. Thus, the author believes it is not simply a perspective shared by institutional or departmental managers but a much wider duty, part of the implicit expectations of an academic as a professional. (This is not the place to discuss the complexities and possible changes to academic and professional identities. For an extensive discussion of that topic see Gordon and Whitchurch 2010). Of course, there is the issue of the important and sensitive interface between academic duty and academic freedom, but it is being argued here that there is need for more attention to that balance i.e. to duty as well as freedom.

Experience shows that context is vital both in relation to SoTL outputs and to attitudes to innovation, enhancement and the sharing of good practice. A major challenge is to retain the real strengths that contextualised studies offer whilst navigating the potential hazard that it presents to adoption of successful innovations from apparently different contexts or reflection upon findings from such situations. Successful strategies such as inter-disciplinary immersion events (change academies) are difficult to upscale. Dissemination strategies exist but probably need to diversify and to devote resource to evaluating impact. Targetted briefings and skilled interpretations may have more to offer in terms of accessing wider audiences. These are now widely used within higher education as part of the communications strategy to support change.

Lest readers become too uncomfortable with the direction of the argument, changes could also be made to approaches to quality assurance/the quality agenda. Baird and Gordon (2009b) explored the potentiality of placing greater store upon working with the intrinsic grain via the locus of the department, rather than the more daunting task of individuals. Put simply, what things would departments do intrinsically to assure the quality of their programme(s)? Would that provide a platform on which to build structures and procedures to address the expectations of stakeholders such as students, employers, funders. They did not expect external pressures to diminish or differences of perspective and priority to disappear. The thrust of the argument was to foster ownership and seek to increase the contributions of internal intrinsic values and

behaviours within the quality agenda. That philosophy might resonate with proponents of SoTL and provide an acceptable means of pursuing explicit adjustment.

### Concluding Remarks

Outlining a simple holistic model of educational development D'Andrea and Gosling (2005) interconnect learning development, quality development and academic development. They argue for quality development as a lever for change, which if "used properly can satisfy the need for public accountability while affirming trust in academics by allowing them to do what they do best: develop, ensure, enhance and deliver educational programmes of study, while giving students the opportunity to achieve their educational goals in a supportive learning community" (p. 187).

SoTL surely can, and indeed does, contribute to that vision, even if explicit alignment is largely suppressed in much of the SoTL literature. Is it time to be bolder and set out visions for the quality agenda which embrace the work of SoTL? Even if the balance of opinion is more cautious, hopefully this article has raised a variety of ways in which SoTL can connect meaningfully and purposefully to ensuring effective approaches to quality assurance and enhancement.

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