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## Towards SoTL as Critical Engagement: A Perspective From the "South"

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## **Abstract**

### **Excerpt:**

In my role as Director of a Centre for Teaching and Learning I support academics to enhance their teaching role by conducting research into teaching and learning, In some cases I am a fellow traveler, working alongside academics, and in some cases I am a team leader, providing support rather than working as a partner. I draw support from the various approaches to research on teaching, of which the scholarship of teaching and learning remains...

## **Keywords**

SoTL as critical engagement

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## **Towards SoTL as Critical Engagement: A Perspective From the “South”**

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### **Introduction**

In my role as Director of a Centre for Teaching and Learning I support academics to enhance their teaching role by conducting research into teaching and learning. In some cases I am a fellow traveler, working alongside academics, and in some cases I am a team leader, providing support rather than working as a partner. I draw support from the various approaches to research on teaching, of which the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) remains one of the most well known. The existence of this journal, *IJ-SOTL*, is testimony to the interest in this field, which seems to be typified by its focus on research on teaching the disciplines, (Kreber, 2007) rather than research undertaken in education faculties.

Despite my enjoyment of reading in the field of the scholarship of teaching and learning, I am often struck by the extent to which this work occurs at a very micro level, and with little reference to the socio-political contexts which make highly contextualized case studies so interesting. In this opinion piece I want to show, with reference to my own teaching and learning context and with reference to an ongoing teaching and learning research project I am involved in, why SoTL should be engaged with critically, and what key aspects would foster this critical engagement.

### **Education in South Africa**

Education in South Africa remains a resource which is both unequally distributed amongst the people of the country, as well as a resource whose very shape and hue is affected by the vestiges, or ravages, of colonialism and apartheid ideology. During apartheid, education was the subject of political strife in more than one way. It was the site of the struggle about identity and culture. For example, the 1976 riots were set off by the attempt of the government to make black students in places like Soweto study in Afrikaans, a language they viewed as that of the oppressors. Education was also the symbol of material and social inequality where students who were black, poor and dominated, were forced to learn an inferior form of curricular material in inadequately resourced settings.

While much has certainly changed in the sixteen years since the advent of democracy, huge divisions between rich and poor are still reflected in the unequal educational provisioning besetting our society, and the social isolation based on race, class and ethnicity persists. In higher education these problems are highlighted by periodic student protests against fees, living conditions, or racism on campuses. Following a report by a Ministerial Committee (2008) to investigate conditions of racism and transformation on South African campuses, all universities have been called upon to report on what they are doing to improve the campus climate and the curriculum.

The point here is not simply that South African higher education is beset by problems caused by its past and the way these persist in the present, it is also to stress the urgency of attempts at meaningful educational transformation. Higher education has an important role to play in contributing to the development of an economically successful and democratic society. So far I have attempted to explain why in my context there is

a need for those who wish to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning to take into account and respond to broader social issues. However, I am not convinced that the South African context is unique in this respect. Whilst the socio-political challenges facing education might be more extreme or seemingly intractable than in other settings, there is surely no setting which is entirely devoid of challenges induced by socio-cultural influences.

### **What Kind of SoTL Is Needed?**

My own preference is for an approach to the scholarship of teaching and learning which asks value-based questions, as Gale (2009) argued in a previous issue of this journal. Gale summarises his argument with a list of questions at three levels:

*Level One Scholarship* asks questions about student learning focused on pedagogical observations, what we value and need to understand as teachers and as scholars.

*Level Two Scholarship* asks questions about student learning that inform and support broader institutional agendas, speaking to shared questions of value and what we need to understand as members of an academic community.

*Level Three Scholarship* asks questions about student learning that speak to and influence issues of significance to society, addressing our values writ large, what we need to understand as members of a local, national, global community.

Gale maintains that these three levels are not necessarily sequential, and that an individual might approach SoTL at any of these levels at any time. I would go further and argue that work undertaken under the banner of SoTL should be influenced by questions at all three of these levels simultaneously, and that this is indeed possible to do. I will attempt to demonstrate this with reference to a collaborative research project in which I have been involved, the "Community, Self and Identity" research project.

### **An illustration: The Community, Self and Identity Project**

A team of six professionals from two universities and spanning several different disciplines came together over five years to conduct a research-based educational innovation. In addition to myself from the Centre for Teaching and Learning, we came from the disciplines of Social Work, Psychology and Occupational Therapy, thus disciplines which should be complementing the work of each other in the community, but where frequently this does not occur, and where professionals in these disciplines might see themselves as competing for status or power. We also came from two universities in the same region, one serving a mainly black, working class and/or rural student grouping, and the other serving a mainly white and middle class student grouping. We were concerned that the students from these two universities were graduating with very little exposure to the "other", and that this would hamper their ability to serve as a confident, self-aware and compassionate professional, in the future.

We set ourselves up as a collaborative curriculum development/research team, and developed a seven week blended learning module which focused on the concepts of "Community, Self and Identity." We attempted to provide fourth year students with an experiential and theoretically rich experience in which they would learn about these concepts, talk and draw in groups, as well as produce presentations for a final session. The students came together physically for three sessions and care was taken that they visit each other's institutions, with which very few were familiar. Drawing on the work of

Boler and Zembylas (2003) we termed this supportive but destabilizing approach to our work the “pedagogy of discomfort.” Space does not permit me to go into detail about the project, and more can be learnt from articles we have written (see for example Bozalek *et al.* 2007, Carolissen *et al.* in press, Leibowitz *et al.* 2010, Rohleder *et al.* 2008, Swartz *et al.* 2009 for more information), but it would be fair to say that the project was a success in several ways.

Student feedback collated in each of the three years showed that roughly 97% of the students responded positively to the question, “Would you recommend repeating the idea of learning with students from another university?” Analysis of the writing and discussion by the students demonstrated that although all students learnt something about engaging in dialogue with students across boundaries of discipline, institution, race and ethnicity, a smaller number benefitted to the extent that they had achieved the aims we had set for all students. For this smaller group, there was deep learning about issues of self and identity in contexts of difference, an awareness of how this would impact on students’ later professional lives, and a sense that they could respond creatively to this challenge. Longitudinal tracking of the students’ learning outcomes is under way, and it is showing that students are indeed taking what they learnt in the course with them into the workplace.

The team’s assessment of its success was not only in relation to the student learning outcomes, but also in terms of the learning of the team members. As Lingard *et al.* (2007: 516) note, “attention to manuscript production [is] a complex act of shaping knowledge production” and indeed this was the case in our research, where we all participated in the analysis of the data and the writing of articles. We met frequently and had to shape the teaching platform as we went along, occasionally having to debate and defend particular pedagogic decisions individuals felt strongly about. We also learnt from our own engagement with issues of difference. For example, in the third and final iteration of the course, we organised for experts from Israel/Palestine to provide training on diversity for ourselves and tutors in the course. We did this in order to experience what the students had to go through, in other words to “practice what we preach” and to experience the emotionally fraught nature of dialogue about difference. We did this with an awareness of the need for those who teach in diverse contexts and about diversity to be cognisant of their own social locatedness and fixedness, (Jansen, 2009), which requires both theoretical and experiential learning to take place (Houser and Thomas, in press).

### SoTL as Critical Engagement

Several features evident in the collaborative research process I have described are valuable for all critically engaged scholarship of teaching and learning. The first of these is research based on *collaboration*. Working collaboratively enhances critically engaged research, as it provides support for people engaged in research which involves risk taking.

The second feature is that of the kind of *interdisciplinarity* described by Nixon (2001), which is based on respect for the disciplines in which the researchers are working. Bringing together individuals from a number of disciplines can help to solve complex problems. When debates about epistemology and knowledge production occur (Davidson, 2004), interdisciplinary approaches can also further a more questioning approach.

A third aspect that enhances critically engaged scholarship of teaching and learning is that of *reflexivity* which includes the kind of reflection on action that leads to teaching improvement in the manner described by Schön (1987), but it also involves deeper and

more embracing forms of questioning. Reflexivity embraces “critical reflection” (Habermas, 1971), a willingness to question the very assumptions on which the discipline/s is based, a willingness to question the knowledge generating processes that researchers are engaged in (Taylor and White, 2000), and a willingness to reflect on one’s values and life choices (Giddens, 1991).

A fourth element vital for critically engaged scholarship involves *learning from students*. This point has been made so often that it has become common sense. Often by learning from students, we mean learning how they learn and about their educational backgrounds or their lifestyles. However in this course, by analyzing student texts we learnt from the students about how people in South Africa talk about difference and how they experience it. Many of our assumptions derived from Psychology, Sociology or Linguistics, had to be decentred and modified in the light of the sense the students were making of the concepts under discussion in the course.

Related to the preparedness to learn and unlearn in relation to students’ sense making, is the final aspect of critically engaged SOTL: a willingness to be surprised, take risks and make oneself vulnerable. The metaphor here is of research as an epistemological and personal journey, with the vehicle being the collaborative team, the navigational tools being one’s disciplinary and research expertise, and for the fuel, a dose of commitment and passion.

I hope I have offered some examples of how more critically engaged scholarship into teaching and learning can occur. To paraphrase Stephen Rowland (2000), to research teaching and learning by focusing merely on the technical aspects could be seen as a form of “surface learning.” Researching teaching in order to engage with the world in which teaching and learning occurs leads to a greater sense of agency and empowerment, and thus, to a more fulfilling career.

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