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Reviewer Essay: Identifying High Quality SoTL Research: A Perspective from a Reviewer

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Abstract

Excerpt: I am pleased to respond to Alan Altany's invitation to write this short piece on what I look for when reviewing research articles for the International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, or for SOTL publications more generally. I do not claim that the three points below are comprehensive or all-encompassing, but rather offer them as a guide to some more relevant considerations I entertain as a reviewer.

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Identifying High Quality SoTL Research: A Perspective from a Reviewer

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I am pleased to respond to Alan Altany's invitation to write this short piece on what I look for when reviewing research articles for the *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, or for SOTL publications more generally. I do not claim that the three points below are comprehensive or all-encompassing, but rather offer them as a guide to some more relevant considerations I entertain as a reviewer.

I. It All Starts with a Problem

Randy Bass's (1999) classic article "The Scholarship of Teaching: What's the Problem?" asks academics to begin considering teaching problems not as something to be hidden, but rather as fertile territory for investigation. When I review a piece for *IJ-SOTL*, or for any scholarship of teaching and learning journal, I look for a compelling problem. If it is a teaching problem with which I can identify from my own experiences, great. If not, I particularly need the author to describe the problem so I can understand it, and in a way that stimulates my thinking. An interesting problem grabs and holds my attention.

II. Contextualize – and De-Contextualize

The scholarship of teaching and learning begins from the assumption that teaching and learning must be viewed in the context of the specific class being taught. While good teaching has much in common across all disciplines, the approaches taken to effectively teach poetry are different, in many ways, from the approaches taken in teaching political science, or accounting. In reviewing submissions for *IJ-SOTL*, I look for the author to show a clear awareness of the unique challenges of and opportunities for teaching in his or her discipline. However, this only gets me so far. While I enjoy reading about how a mathematician struggles to help her students understand the nature of mathematics proofs, or how a literature professor tries to help his students understand *Beowulf*, I would also like the piece to include something that I, as a political scientist, can use in my class. Context matters – but so does the ability to move beyond the narrow context to teach something (anything!) useful to those outside the narrow field.

III. Considering Different Types of Evidence

In considering different pieces for publication, I find myself swayed by pieces that use authentic assessments of student learning – particularly evidence drawn from student assignments. This is not to say I would never look favorably upon pieces that survey students for their perceptions of their learning, or of their skill levels. There is certainly a place for such data; I've used this method in my own work, often with reasonable success. But if the author of a piece is able to lay out goals for what students should be able to do,

and then can document through consideration of student exams, papers or class discussions that students can do these things, that evidence would prove quite compelling to me.

I hope readers of this piece find these comments to be useful for their own future submissions to SOTL publications.

Reference

Bass, Randy. 1999. "The Scholarship of Teaching: What's the Problem? *Inventio*, Volume 1, Number 1.