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Abstract

The most important function of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is to enhance student learning. There are numerous strategies to increase application and positive impact of our SoTL work on student learning. In this essay, I remind readers of two, sometimes neglected, strategies: 1. incorporating methods and measures in our SoTL studies to find and understand the processes and conditions at work and 2. doing all we can to share the results of relevant SoTL work directly with students so they can make use of the implications of SoTL findings. Our neglect of these two strategies in much SoTL work limits our impact. In this essay, I offer multiple ways and examples to implement these strategies. We need to remember to get at the „why“ and the „how“ in our SoTL projects as well as to share our results directly with our students and help them apply what we have learned.

Keywords

Methodology, Processes, Application, Interpretation, Students, Impact

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Increasing the Impact of SoTL: Two Sometimes Neglected Opportunities

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Abstract

The most important function of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is to enhance student learning. There are numerous strategies to increase application and positive impact of our SoTL work on student learning. In this essay, I remind readers of two, sometimes neglected, strategies: 1. incorporating methods and measures in our SoTL studies to find and understand the processes and conditions at work and 2. doing all we can to share the results of relevant SoTL work directly with students so they can make use of the implications of SoTL findings. Our neglect of these two strategies in much SoTL work limits our impact. In this essay, I offer multiple ways and examples to implement these strategies. We need to remember to get at the „why“ and the „how“ in our SoTL projects as well as to share our results directly with our students and help them apply what we have learned.

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Introduction

It was difficult to select a topic for this invited essay as there are so many intriguing discussions and debates in this vast, multi-disciplinary, international field we call the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Numerous topics have intrigued me (and, of course, many of you) over the years and are still ripe for development and analysis. A sample includes definitions of SoTL and overlap with assessment and traditional educational research; student voices in SoTL; interdisciplinarity and SoTL; appropriate methods and standards for SoTL¹; involvement in and reward for SoTL; issues of context and generalizability; and ways to enhance application/use of SoTL findings in and beyond our classrooms. Hutchings, Huber, and Ciccone (2011) have recently pointed out that, over time, the emphasis in SoTL has “shifted from definitional debates to questions of impact, and the focus has shifted from the design of individual projects to collaborative work that can influence institutional change” (pg. 125). I, too, have long been interested in issues of more powerful and broader application and impact of SoTL (McKinney, 2006; McKinney, 2007; McKinney, 2010; McKinney, 2012; McKinney and Jarvis, 2009). Thus, as I thought about these and other ongoing conversations, I decided to focus on two subtopics--both within the discussion of application and impact--that are critical to most SoTL projects and connect with many of these other important discussions and debates.

Though SoTL serves many positive functions in the academy, the most important is having an impact on student learning (e.g., better designed courses and pedagogies, understanding of threshold concepts, increased transfer of learning, learning that lasts over time). Therefore, we need to do all we can to improve our ability to apply our SoTL work to enhance learning. There are many strategies to do this. Here I focus on two strategies that may seem obvious. Yet, in my experience working with faculty members doing SoTL and

serving as an editor/reviewer of SoTL work, both are under-utilized. First, we must more often incorporate methods and measures in our SoTL projects to find and understand the processes and conditions (and/or intervening variables) at work when we study the relationship between a teaching „intervention“² and student learning. Second, we should remember that students are a key audience for SoTL and do all we can to share the results of relevant SoTL work directly with students so they can make use of the implications of these findings to improve their own learning.

Getting at Processes and Conditions

Much of SoTL attempts to gather evidence, broadly defined, about student learning as influenced by some aspect of our teaching or context and, especially, of an assignment or pedagogical strategy (Pike, 2011). We may be interested in, for example, the role of a particular assignment or reading, a change in curricular emphasis, the addition of an instructional technology or an enhancement of collaboration, and how that strategy or intervention relates to learning. Often, SoTL researchers simply use the intervention or strategy then look at measures (perceived or direct) of learning. Evidence may be qualitative, quantitative, or both. Perhaps there is a control group of some sort or pre and post measures; perhaps not. In many cases, there is only speculation--at most--about the specific nature of the relationship between the intervention and learning.

Of course, it is wonderful to have evidence that an intervention is related to learning! At the same time, how does this alone answer the questions, „why?“ and „how?“³ How does this assist us with specific applications and implications, given the contextual nature of teaching and learning? How does this help others adapt the intervention successfully for their situation or purpose? How does this move the field forward toward answering big picture questions? What we really need, then, in more of our SoTL projects are methods for gathering data/evidence of what goes on during and after the intervention and how this promotes learning. We need to directly and explicitly, as much as is possible, measure the processes and conditions that link the intervention to learning.

How might we more often address the need to gather evidence for „why“ and „how“? Many strategies exist.

- Obtain student voices via qualitative reflection about processes and conditions using learning reflection essays, interviews, or focus groups.

- Incorporate an observational component to the research where observers could code process variables (e.g., increased peer discussion, practicing authentic tasks, modeling successful behaviors) they see taking place.

- Draw on theories of learning that suggest possible conditions and processes *a priori* then plan ahead to include measures of such variables in the study.

- Use longitudinal designs with multiple methods and/or measures taken at key points in time during the intervention and the learning process to increase the likelihood of obtaining data pointing to intervening processes and conditions.

- Move from isolated SoTL projects to undertaking a series of related SoTL studies where each additional study attempts to ferret out specific conditions or qualify past results.

In a recent issue of this journal, a few papers illustrate some of these strategies. For example, Livshin (2011) gathered qualitative data from students to measure both their

learning of concepts related to social capital as well as to obtain student beliefs about how and why their work in groups facilitated this learning. Li (2011) took a multi-method approach to study learning gains and the processes and conditions that promote them as a result of the use of peer assessment activities. In a third example, Sams and Sams (2011) drew on the theory of self-efficacy as the important process linking the use of case studies, critical analysis, and learning. Then they designed their study to explicitly include measures of this process. In one of my studies focusing on learning by sociology majors, I followed a small group of majors over a two to three year period with multiple measures at different points in time in an effort (though not as successful as I had hoped!) to uncover processes and conditions of learning (McKinney and Naseri, 2011).

Students as a Primary Audience

A second important strategy to increase the impact of our SoTL results is to take students seriously as an audience of our SoTL projects⁴. Most often, when we make SoTL public, we consider our faculty/staff colleagues, within and beyond our discipline, as our primary audience. Often, we include other audiences such as personnel committees, administrators, or journal editors and reviewers. Much less routinely do we view, and act upon, students as a primary audience. Students as an audience can be considered part of the student voices emphasis in SoTL (Werder and Otis, 2010). But that emphasis generally focuses on students as co-researchers (broadly conceptualized) in SoTL work rather than as audience or consumers of SoTL. What we know about teaching and learning should not be kept, even unintentionally, a secret from our students.

What would it look like to take students seriously as an audience for our work? We must expose students to relevant SoTL research and findings as well as help them reflect and apply those findings to their own efforts to improve learning. Strategies include the following.

- Make SoTL public at conferences students attend and in publications students read. Create a local SoTL journal or newsletter aimed specifically at college students at your institution or a national/international one for students in a specific major or discipline.

- Use SoTL publications as required readings in courses where they are appropriate such as a disciplinary/department new majors" orientation class, a Research Methods course, a Capstone course, or a Professional socialization course.

- Facilitate and invite students to sessions on learning on campus that share, and discuss implications of, local SoTL results.

- Volunteer to create a session at your disciplinary meetings focusing on key SoTL results and explicitly involve and invite students.

- Add a section of relevant SoTL study results and any implications for students to your department website within the web pages for students.

- Help organize a panel where SoTL researchers present and lead a discussion with students at a meeting of your student disciplinary/department club.

- Include in your courses, when appropriate, reflective and meta-cognitive assignments that help students relate SoTL literature and findings to their own learning opportunities and behaviors.

Interesting examples of some of these strategies also exist. Indiana University offers a "Collegium on Inquiry in Action" where graduate students are exposed to SoTL research

results to improve both their own learning and their teaching of others. At my institution, we sometimes (not often enough!) sponsor "Student-Faculty Conversations on Learning" where we invite students, faculty members, and staff to come together and engage in facilitated small group discussions about a specific learning topic including providing some SoTL research on that topic. Other institutions, Elon University and Western Washington University, for example, have done a great job bringing many students to the meetings of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. At the U. S. Air Force Academy, explicit invitations are made to groups of students to attend the papers and posters being presented by faculty at their annual SoTL Forum. I recently wrote the text under three brief resource links for students on our department website. The page summarizes some of what we know about learning in general and in my discipline that stems from theory and research (including SoTL research), as well as possible implications for students' own behaviors.

Conclusion

These two, rather obvious yet sometimes neglected, opportunities to enhance application of SoTL projects connect to many of the other important debates and discussions in the field noted in the opening paragraph of this essay. Involving students in SoTL from listening carefully to their perceptions of teaching and learning to providing them roles as co-researchers (student voices) overlaps with efforts to learn „why“ and „how“ as well as to seeing students as a primary audience for our work. Remembering to explicitly measure processes and conditions relates to debates about the nature of SoTL methods, the value of qualitative and descriptive data as well as standards for SoTL work. Seeking and understanding processes and conditions also relates to context and generalizability, and helps us offer student audiences concrete suggestions while also moving us toward big picture questions that span institutions, disciplines, and national boundaries. Key ideas in the field of SoTL such as decoding the disciplines, habits of the mind, bottlenecks, and ways of thinking and practicing all help us to understand the „why“ and the „how“ and are important ideas from which students could benefit. Finally, the role of theory in SoTL is strengthened both by using theory to help us decide how to measure possible learning processes and conditions as well as by using our empirical findings about such processes and conditions to build on and adjust existing theory.

Our ability to make a difference with our SoTL findings-- to adapt them, apply them, and understand their context-- can be enhanced by knowing not just what works but „why“ and „how“. Similarly, taking students seriously as a primary audience for our SoTL findings and helping them to use such findings in their own learning should enhance the impact of SoTL work.

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¹ Though my language reflects a social science background, my intent is a broad definition or understanding of terms such as evidence, data, method, and measures. I believe SoTL is evidence-informed but that there are many types, forms, and ways to obtain evidence for student learning as well as multiple standards to evaluate SoTL work.

² Intervention should be understood as a broad concept here, not at all restricted to manipulated independent variables in experimental or quasi-experimental designs.

³ I realize not all SoTL projects seek to answer „why“; some --in Hutchings“ (2000) words-- are designed to answer „what is“ questions or „what works“ questions, but many SoTL projects implicitly seek to answer or speculate about „why“ and others would offer more value to the field and to student learning if they gathered data on „why“ and „how“.

⁴ Of course students are the participants (subjects or co-researchers) in most of our SoTL work, engaging them as an important audience for that work overlaps with those roles but is also different.