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April L. McGrath

Mount Royal University, amcgrath@mtroyal.ca

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Abstract

This personal reflection describes my development as a professor engaged in SoTL, describing the path from an unsure graduate student to an early career faculty member working at an undergraduate university dedicated to excellence in teaching. I was introduced to SoTL at the beginning of my doctoral program and received the necessary support to pursue my research interests in the area of writing and feedback. The mentoring provided by a faculty member during that time ensured that I followed through on my first SoTL research project. Since then, support from a SoTL program at my current institute has allowed me to learn more about SoTL and to take my research in different directions, all the while keeping student learning at the centre of my inquiries.

Keywords

scholarship of teaching and learning, professional development, writing, feedback

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An Early Introduction to SoTL and the Shaping of an Academic Career

April McGrath Mount
Royal University Calgary,
Alberta, Canada
amcgrath@mtroyal.ca

Abstract

This personal reflection describes my development as a professor engaged in SoTL, describing the path from an unsure graduate student to an early career faculty member working at an undergraduate university dedicated to excellence in teaching. I was introduced to SoTL at the beginning of my doctoral program and received the necessary support to pursue my research interests in the area of writing and feedback. The mentoring provided by a faculty member during that time ensured that I followed through on my first SoTL research project. Since then, support from a SoTL program at my current institute has allowed me to learn more about SoTL and to take my research in different directions, all the while keeping student learning at the centre of my inquiries.

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I still remember walking along the brick-lined pathway of the campus I called home while completing my undergraduate degree and wondering what I would be. I really enjoyed my time at that university; I fell in love with psychology and learning. I admired my professors, many of whom were caring, happy, and interesting people. On that day, I considered the possibility of becoming a professor and indeed that is the path I have taken. This reflection tells the story of the path I followed to become a professor engaged in SoTL.

Like many graduate students I was thrust into the role of teaching assistant. I had to evaluate the quality of work of students who were barely my junior. My experience in this position was riddled with uncertainty and fear. Few students came to my office hours, and I also secretly hoped few would in case they asked a question I did not know the answer to. Only in later years as a teaching assistant, after becoming familiar with a course, learning more about my discipline, and developing my research skills did I recognize that I did have something to offer undergraduate students. I could actually help students learn. This was a great feeling and I ran with it. Specifically, I spent considerable amounts of time grading essays and providing students with feedback on their writing. Feeling that my writing advice might be helpful to students as they were actually writing their essays, and not just at the end of a graded essay, I became a writing tutor.

Working with students individually on their writing assignments was very satisfying. For the most part, students who visited the writing centre were highly motivated. They wanted to review their writing for an hour and find ways to clearly express what they were trying to say. I had many wonderful exchanges with students about writing, and the positive visits I continued to have with returning students solidified my interest in teaching. Fortunately for me, the psychology department at my university offered a graduate seminar course on university teaching and I wasted no time by enrolling in it during the first year of my Ph.D.

I knew I was interested in teaching, and I knew that I wanted to be a good teacher. I was driven to ignite students' passion for psychology as my professors had for me, and I was hoping this course about teaching would lead the way. It did that and so much more. This graduate course was taught by a psychology professor who had received national awards for his teaching and who was a prolific researcher. This course went far beyond the standard tips offered during a workshop. In this class I was asked to develop my teaching philosophy (my what?); I was introduced to the work of Parker Palmer (1999), William McKeachie (2006), Bell Hooks (1994), among others; and I had to consider how everything I would do and create in a course would result in the learning outcomes specified in a course syllabus. And importantly, I was introduced to SoTL and began to think about teaching practices with the same methodological rigor I applied to studies from my research area.

During this course I gave a research-based presentation on student learning. I decided to focus my talk on writing and feedback because it was my time as a writing tutor that led me to the class. Through working on this presentation I was introduced to a considerable amount of scholarly work on student writing and the effect written feedback can have on student learning. Yet some of the articles I read offered guidance for writing feedback but with little *evidence* to suggest such feedback would positively influence students' writing, and even more alarming were articles documenting the communication mishaps inherent in feedback (Chanock, 2000; Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010) and the possibility that feedback might not improve students' writing as much as we think (Hillocks, 2008). At this point I felt comfortable enough with SoTL to create my own research project. I wanted to know if constructing feedback according to guidelines found in the literature would actually help students develop their writing.

I asked a fellow graduate student to join me in the project and with the supervision of the professor who taught the teaching seminar the project was underway. We had to navigate the ethical waters of conducting research with students in one's own class and we had to learn more about research conducted on student writing and feedback. Fortunately, with the support of a professor who valued SoTL we were able to conduct our study and publish the results. This was a satisfying process that has me hooked on SoTL. My future SoTL projects will continue to focus on the topic of feedback and writing. Professors invest a considerable amount of time in responding to student writing, which makes me wonder what effect does feedback have on student writing, and how can we create feedback that students will use and benefit from?

While I enjoy doing research within the area of social psychology, I also take great pleasure in conducting research on student learning, the very thing that I spend much of my day trying to promote. If I had not taken that teaching seminar in graduate school I am not sure at what point I would have learned about SoTL. I was fortunate to learn about SoTL early in my career and in a SoTL friendly environment. I am now even more fortunate to be at a university that values excellence in undergraduate teaching so much so that we have an institute specifically devoted to the development of SoTL projects by faculty members.

At Mount Royal University, I was introduced to the Institute for the SoTL during the orientation week for my new position. I wasted no time in following up about the program and submitting a research proposal. Fortunately my application was accepted and I am now part of a group of faculty members that will work together over the next year to develop, refine, and carry out their SoTL research projects.

I cannot imagine my current position without SoTL. Like many professors I constantly question my classroom practices and reflect on ways to improve the delivery of my courses. But unlike some professors who have not been introduced to SoTL or for whatever reason have a misunderstanding of SoTL, I read peer-reviewed publications about the practices professors use in their classrooms and the effects such practices have on student learning. These articles influence my teaching and how I structure my courses. For example, I now engage students in peer review (Herrington & Cadman, 1991); I try to create memorable demonstrations of statistical concepts (Christopher & Marek, 2009), and I plan to implement audio-recorded feedback in an upcoming class (Lunt & Curran, 2010). Reading this literature also leads me to generate research questions that result in new SoTL projects.

While I have heard anecdotes from colleagues about others being resistant to SoTL, my experience luckily has been the opposite. From the beginning of my doctoral degree to my current position as a new faculty member I have been surrounded by people and programs that encourage the scholarly investigation of teaching and learning. Without such people and programs my career would not be as rich, my research program not as satisfying, and my classroom practice not as informed. My hope is that more institutions continue to recognize the value of SoTL so that faculty members can be both introduced to SoTL and supported in such endeavors. Shulman (2011) has suggested that SoTL should become a component of doctoral programs, and I could not agree more. Registering for that one course in university teaching and finding a professor who values SoTL has made a great deal of difference in my development as an academic. And now program support available to me, as a faculty member, will ensure that SoTL remains an important part of my career.

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