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## Have We Lost Focus on Our Students' Learning?

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# Have We Lost Focus on Our Students' Learning?

## **Abstract**

**Excerpt:** As a teacher in organisational psychology for more years than I care to remember (and yes students get younger every year!) and subsequently the Director of several university Learning and Teaching Units, I have come to wonder whether the “L” in SoTL has become lost or hidden from the public view. I believe that the pendulum has swung too far towards focusing on ‘what the teacher does’ instead of ‘what do we know about how and what the student is learning?’

## **Keywords**

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## Have We Lost Focus on Our Students' Learning?

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As a teacher in organisational psychology for more years than I care to remember (and yes students get younger every year!) and subsequently the Director of several university Learning and Teaching Units, I have come to wonder whether the "L" in SoTL has become lost or hidden from the public view. I believe that the pendulum has swung too far towards focusing on 'what the teacher does' instead of 'what do we know about how and what the student is learning?'

For many years my work focused on inquiring into how teachers could create an effective learning environment. In fact, Emeritus Professor Adrian Lee and I, together with colleagues from the University of New South Wales developed a set of Guidelines on Learning that Inform Teaching (<http://www.guidelinesonlearning.com/>). Evidence of the application of these guidelines was embedded in promotion, tenure confirmation, faculty learning and teaching performance indicators and other teaching recognition processes.

More recently, two factors have influenced my views on the importance of evidence of enhanced student learning. The first is the emphasis being placed by the new Australian regulatory body (TEQSA) on standards of teaching (input measures) and standards of learning (output measures). These are treated separately by TEQSA.

Teaching and learning standards in higher education encompass:

- Those dimensions of curriculum, teaching, learner support and assessment that establish the pre-conditions for the achievement of learning and educational outcomes fit for the awarding of a higher education qualification
- The explicit levels of attainment required of and achieved by students and graduates, individually and collectively, in defined areas of knowledge and skills

(TEQSA Discussion Paper 2011)

University programs or courses must be able to demonstrate that actual student work reaches a minimum standard (already determined by discipline groups [www.altc.edu.au/standards](http://www.altc.edu.au/standards)).

There is a definite shift from a sole focus on the teacher and teaching. "In many higher education settings, it has become a kind of anathema to talk about teaching without invoking evidence of learning; and the assessment movement has formalised this impulse, calling on programs and institutions to identify their contributions to student learning outcomes. In addition, of course, individual faculty members routinely generate and examine evidence of learning in the process of assignment design, grading, and giving their students feedback to guide subsequent efforts." (Hutchings, Huber and Ciccone, 2011)

In Australia this shift to evidence of student learning outcomes has been reinforced by government financed projects to identify Threshold Learning Outcomes for individual

disciplines. This has been achieved by bringing together stakeholders across a given discipline. Assurance that students have achieved or exceeded given learning outcomes is being demonstrated through peer review of a sample of final year students' work.

The second factor that has caused me to reevaluate my focus, relates to my experience of reviewing an Australian Teaching Fellowship Program. What surprised me in reviewing Fellowship criteria and actual portfolios submitted for the award of a Fellowship was the absence of any requirement for evidence of a linkage between learning and teaching approaches and evidence of enhanced student learning. I interviewed numerous Fellows. To quote one National Fellow's response to the question, "what is the impact of your practice on student learning? The answer was 'nil'."

Of course, it is likely that the depth of knowledge, the level of preparation, the nature and creation of a positive learning environment, the engagement in ongoing feedback and reflection would be characteristics of the Fellows interviewed and would be associated with much evidence of high achievement by their students. (Bain, 2004)

In interviewing National Teaching Fellows across the world, the belief was that the Fellowship was about personal scholarly reflection, not about having scholarly work that might lead to a form of SoTL.

As part of the Fellowship evaluation, I compared the criteria for the Teaching Fellowships. See Table below:

Criteria	HERDSA	3M	University of Queensland	HE A	SED A	University of Leicester
Excellence in teaching		✓		✓		✓
Commitment to the improvement of University teaching (leadership beyond one's own classroom)	✓	✓	✓			
Raising the profile of excellence				✓		✓
Personal professional development	✓			✓	✓	✓
Improvement to the student's learning experience	✓		✓			✓
Strategic alignment with University Learning and Teaching goals		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

It is conceivable that there are implicit criteria in the Fellowship that focus on evidence of the impact of the Fellow's practice on their students learning. What is noticeably missing is the requirement to foster "networks" or "communities of practice".

What is common is an emphasis on professional development and reflective teaching practice and recognition and reward for teaching excellence.

Is this a concern? I believe it is. The ability to provide evidence of enhanced student learning requires a deeper understanding of how our students learn in both disciplinary and interdisciplinary contexts and the evidence relating to what they are learning.

The Fellows I interviewed described the solitude of their experience. As Shulman (1993, p. 6-7) notes, what is preferable to such individual solitude as experienced by a number of Teaching Fellows, is the experience of membership of active communities:

communities of conversation, communities of evaluation, communities in which we gather with others in our invisible colleges to exchange our findings; to share a product which is, in itself peer reviewed.

How might Fellowship Programs lead to rich understanding and inquiry into disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning and teaching? Teaching Fellowships, that actively foster communities of practice, (whether real, virtual or a combination of both), such as in collaborative writing groups and learning circles, can meet the expectations of many Fellows interviewed and provide leadership in SoTL.

Membership of communities of practice depends on the interests and motivation of individual Fellows. However, membership implies a commitment to a domain (e.g. how and what are students learning in capstone units in business), shared activities and discussions of educational practice, its challenges and effective practices (Wenger, 2012)

Teaching Fellowships have the potential for creating communities of practice needed to evolve new pedagogies (Palmer 2010) and are a powerful alternative to the solitude of individual practice and remind us of the value of focusing on the evidence of the impact of teaching on student learning.

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