Empowering the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: Towards an Authentic Practice

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Empowering the scholarship of teaching and learning:
Towards an authentic practice

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My intent is to explore

1. What ‘going public’ in SOTL could mean
2. Formative versus summative assessment in SOTL
3. Whether SOTL is an ‘evidence-based practice’
4. How SOTL articulates with the internal aims and processes of higher education and the external purposes of universities
5. Questions that could be asked when SOTL is seen not only as an instrumental and communicative but also as an emancipatory project
But when can I have my cake?
But something really new

2350 years ago

Aristotle distinguishes between the world of ‘praxis’ (requiring practical wisdom) and the world of ‘production’ (requiring technical knowledge)
Fifty years ago

Hannah Arendt articulates her interpretation of ‘praxis’ as ‘action’—the public activity whereby people create and renew their common world.
Jürgen Habermas suggests that there is *not only a technical and communicative* human interest but also a *critical* human interest aimed at *emancipation*. 
Twenty years ago

“The time has come to move beyond the tired old ‘teaching versus research’ debate and give the familiar and honorable term ‘scholarship’ a broader, more capacious meaning…” (Boyer, 1990).
Ten years ago

“We develop a scholarship of teaching when our work as teachers becomes public, peer-reviewed and critiqued. And exchanged with members of our professional communities so they, in turn, can build on our work” (Shulman, 2000).
"The Teaching Commons are a conceptual space in which communities of educators committed to inquiry and innovation come together to exchange ideas about teaching and learning and use them to meet the challenges of educating students ..." (Huber and Hutchings (2005).
1. Going public

- **Action** is public engagement through which we practice our freedom and create a common world (Arendt, 1958)

- Scholarship is public (Shulman, 2000)

- It means to share our views with others who are part of our common world, or part of *The Teaching Commons*.
Going public as ‘coming out’

- more than sharing our research findings at a conference or in a journal article (although that takes courage, too);

- to take a stance, to ‘come out’ and speak one’s own mind in a public space.

- to be authentic: getting clear for ourselves what our own deliberations lead us to believe and then honestly and fully expressing this in public places (Guignon, 2006).
Plurality and Natality

► **Plurality:** we are all distinct yet equal. (e.g., we all share the common world of higher education and yet each of us is unique and has some distinct view or position to offer)

► **Natality:** with each person there is the chance of a new beginning. Participating in dialogue is akin to a “second birth” (Arendt, 1958).

"The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him" (Arendt, 1958)

► the unpredictability of human action
► the possibility for something new to happen.
Patricia Cross’s (keynote address delivered to AAHE in 1998)

“We might do better to think of *research findings as the start of our conversations and investigations* into teaching and learning rather than as the conclusion”.

The public enquiry-oriented critical dialogue we engage in, across differences, on significant issues in relation to teaching and learning is scholarship; this public dialogue is not just what follows from SOTL.

It is through this engagement across diverse views, ideally with students, that we can build new learning environments that stand a greater chance of enriching the experiences of all students.
2. From summative to formative assessment

- Reference to ‘SOTL Research’ makes it increasingly difficult to talk about SoTL as a practice (without this practice being considered somehow inferior to SoTL Research).

- What then are the criteria typically employed in assessing scholarship?
Mertonian Norms of Science

The work requires

► high levels of discipline-specific expertise,
► breaks new ground or is innovative,
► can be replicated or elaborated,
► can be peer-reviewed and
► is of significance or has impact
Carnegie Criteria (Glassick et al, 1997)

The work be characterised by

► clear goals,
► adequate preparation,
► appropriate methodology,
► effective presentation,
► significant results and
► reflective critique.
Perhaps more inclusive, but what is and what is not recognized as scholarship is a function of the frameworks presently available to us for assessing it.

Q: Are there alternatives available to us?
First alternative framework: **Inquiry**

Andresen (2000) identified four quintessential features of Scholarship.

► deep knowledge,
► *an inquiry-orientation,*
► reflectivity and
► peer-review or going public.
Second alternative framework: **Authenticity:**

Grimmet and Neufeld (1994):
- doing what is *externally rewarded,*
- doing what is *internally rewarding* (to myself),
- and doing what ‘*is good*’

*SOTL is an authentic practice when it is intentionally directed at making a positive difference in the lives of students (and ultimately to our common world).*
Third alternative framework: Ideal speech conditions

**Under ideal condition adults**

- Have accurate and complete information
- Are free from coercion or self-deception
- Have the ability to reflect critically
- Are open to alternative perspectives
- Have equality of opportunity to participate
- Will accept an informed objective and rational consensus as a legitimate test of validity (Habermas, 1983; Mezirow, 1991)
The need for such open public discussions, or ‘action’ as Hannah Arendt (1958) put it, lies in the promise that it is through action that we have the chance of renewing our (common) world.

Assessment?

- Not carried out by a selected few but
- a *shared task* between all members of the professional and academic community of university teachers engaged in public dialogue around teaching and learning
3. SOTL: An evidence-based practice

An intriguing paradox

► On the one hand

"The reflective practitioner" (Schön, 1983)

The realm of human interaction cannot be reduced to one of technical rationality (apply research findings of educational researchers to achieve certain results).
On the other hand

“Evidence-based practice”

Through research we determine how effective and efficient certain strategies are for the achievements of certain ends; the evidence offered by research guides future actions.

Evidence-based practices are more valuable than our own more intuitive theories-in-use.
Two reservations

► *Firstly,* discourse of evidence-based practice **does not invite questions about the desirability of the ends** towards it is directed (let alone the means), but is concerned solely with the effectiveness of means (Biesta, 2007).

► *Secondly,* it **ignores** the complexities, contingencies and **unpredictability** of human action (Arendt, 1958).
Instrumental/scientific approaches to learning about teaching are limited

- they do not consider individual characteristics of students and teachers,
- do not address the goals of education,
- ignore the complexity and unpredictability of human communication, and
- are not sensitive to changes in social and organizational cultures (Cranton, 1998).
“I cannot think of anything more unfair than … to treat all students as if they are the same, when they so manifestly are not” (Elton 2000: 1)
Individuality, contingency, unpredictability

(the myth of the 3 min, 4 min or 5 min soft-boiled egg!)
“The degree to which the teacher’s actions strikes a responsive chord in others who will co-operate with it and carry it to completion—is always a happening as well as an achievement. It may well be forthcoming but it cannot be reliably guaranteed; even if it has happened for him with some regularity in the past, there still remains an element of hazard about each new occasion on which it is actualized” (Dunne, leaning on Arendt, 1997).
“Educational research cannot tell us what works - it can only tell us what worked” (Biesta, 2007).

Power to influence is then a “potentiality in being together...not an unchangeable, measurable, and reliable entity” (Arendt, 1958)
“The more we come to understand teaching and learning... the more we realise that it is neither entirely under our control nor subject to established principles. Perhaps becoming a scholar of teaching starts with this understanding” (Cranton, 1998).
“We act authentically when we are perceptive of the actual and unique needs of varying groups of learners and resist instrumentalist approaches to teaching that claim that the needs of our students can be met by following a certain set of means, thereby ignoring the contingency, particularity and variability of teaching and learning” (Nixon, 2008).
The teacher’s self-knowledge

- **Phronesis (practical wisdom)**
  *The knowledge needed for praxis/action*

- To act phronetically means to accurately assess a given situation and make an appropriate decision, while abandoning the security offered by rules and regulatives for the sake of meeting “the other” in his or concrete uniqueness.
Evidence-\textit{informed} practice

- our decisions are \textit{informed} \textit{not determined} by research.
- To act authentically in teaching, and as scholars of teaching, then inevitably also involves \textit{investing one's self in one's actions}. I have to decide and take responsibility for my actions in the light of uncertainty and contingency;
- I cannot hide behind any ‘evidence-based’ rules or algorithms although research findings may inform my decision.
4. Self-knowledge and the aims of higher education

“The most important question for educational professionals is therefore not about the effectiveness of their actions but about the potential educational value of what they do” (Biesta, 2007).

“What are the aims of higher education and through which educational processes are we hoping to achieve these?
What SOTL is for?

► “Educators need to engage in pedagogical inquiry so as to meet the challenges of educating students for personal, professional and civic life in the twenty-first century” (Huber and Hutchings, 2005)

► Q: Is this compatible with how most academics understand the aims of higher educations?
A synthesis of aims

“Contained within the idea of higher education are the notions of **critical dialogue**, of **self-reflection**, of **conversations**, and of **continuing redefinition**. They do justice to the idea of higher education ....” (Barnett, 1992).
“The college should encourage each student to develop **the capacity to judge wisely** in matters of life and conduct....The goal is ...to **set them free in the world of ideas** and provide a climate in which **ethical and moral choices** can be thought-fully examined, and convictions formed” (Ernest Boyer, 1987)
Perspectives on HE

“In order to foster a democracy that genuinely takes thought for the common good, we (in higher education) must produce citizens who have the Socratic capacity to reason about their beliefs” (Martha Nussbaum, 1997)
Perspectives on HE

“At the very core of learning at university (but also of research and teaching, and the links between them) is enquiry rooted in intellectual love.

Students should be involved in learning that is characterised by dialogue across theoretical and disciplinary boundaries, where they develop the capacity to challenge the ideological positions and assumptions that underlie the various perspectives they encounter” (Stephen Rowland, 2006).
Dialogue

“true conversation means taking seriously the critical viewpoints of others, perhaps even entering a different world held open by those others” (Ron Barnett, 1992).

Arendt (2007, originally published in 1954) once argued that the great challenge for education is to offer experiences that help students become prepared “for the task of renewing the common world”.

Training the mind to go ‘visiting’ (Hannah Arendt, 2003)
SOTL-pedagogy and subject

- The emphasis on conversations across different perspectives, where novel questions can be asked and issues raised, is characteristic to scholarship;

- by extension, the dialogue about the subject that teachers encourage among and with students in the context of their own courses is also part of SOTL.
Internal educational aims and processes *versus* external purposes?

► "*preparing for civic responsibility*"
  -- supporting students in becoming critical rather than compliant citizen,

► "*preparing for employability*"
  -- not fitting graduates into predetermined roles but as helping them shape the world of work,

► "*preparing for lifelong learning*"
  -- not solely about satisfying personal and economic purposes but opening spaces for learning for underprivileged groups and promoting moral development, learning for social justice, democracy and civic responsibility.
Agency not Compliance

The agency and possibilities this reinterpretation of ‘external purposes’ allows for is then not a matter of uncritically succumbing to an externally driven agenda but of creating an internal agenda and owning it.
In and through SOTL then, we attempt to involve students in critical dialogue across different points of view and theoretical frameworks so that they have opportunities to acquire the ability to make reasoned judgements needed for their personal, vocational and civic lives. Promising ways of doing so include engagement in enquiry (Rowland, 2005, 2006), training the mind go visiting (Arendt, 2003), and a pedagogy of inspiration and solicitude (Barnett, 2007).
Consistency between educational processes and aims

The means of higher education (engagement in enquiry, training the mind go visiting and a pedagogy of inspiration and solicitude) and the aims (and external purposes) of higher education (such as criticality, curiosity, democracy) are then internally related (Carr, 2000).
5. SOTL questions

► “Will this method lead to better learning?”

► “What does it look like when a student begins to think with a concept rather than simply about it?”

*(Hutchings & Shulman, 1999).*

► However, if SOTL is a way of enhancing the opportunities of all students rather than just some, we need to move beyond instrumental and communicative questions and *explore also more critical(ly inspired) questions.*
Empowering SOTL

► We want to know ‘**what works**’ or how **effective** the teaching approaches are that we employ in particular situations (**instrumental learning**).

► We want to better understand how students **experience** particular learning processes and, in relation to this, we also want to know ‘**what is right**’ or how **meaningful** and **desirable** are our strategies and goals (**communicative learning**).

► However, we also want to know whether practices that made sense in a previous higher education context are still meaningful today and whether they might inadvertently privilege or disadvantage certain individuals or groups.
“The scholarship of teaching is concerned not so much with doing things better but with doing better things” (Elton, 2002).

Through SOTL we are also interested in understanding for whom it works, for whom not, in what contexts, and why and in acting on these insights.
The social sciences should turn to questions such as:

► “what are we doing, who gains-who loses, by which mechanisms of power, is this desirable and what can be done’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001).
Questions that could be asked that address issues of power

- Does it make sense to have the same assessment methods for all students given the plurality of actors?
What do our feedback practices suggest about the extent to which we care about students and their experience of higher education?

How culturally sensitive is my course?

How do we presently cultivate intellectual love for the subject and an enquiry-orientation in students, and how do we do this for students who differ in the levels of cultural capital deemed valuable for success in higher education?

Does engagement in the course motivate students to learn more, is it alienating to some, and why?
How do students perceive the subtle messages that we sent by the learning environments we provide?

Who seems to thrive and who seems to struggle in class discussions, course work or exams, and why?

What career paths do we model as the norm?

What types of knowledge are valued, and why?

What forms of discourse are valued, and why?
So what?

- SOTL can be observed *not only* in the investigations we undertake into matters of teaching and learning,
- and *not only* in the pedagogical artefacts we develop,
- *but also* in the *enquiry-oriented public dialogue* among teachers and students, each uniquely positioned, *where diverse points of view are disclosed and new questions raised.*
This SOTL dialogue focuses on matters of pedagogy and curriculum but also can be observed as teachers engage with students in critical conversations about the subject matter itself.
Pedagogical investigations based on **instrumental, communicative and emancipatory** learning shared at conferences and in other public spaces.

Public enquiry-oriented critical dialogue across differences hold the promise to **empower** not only students and teachers who are part of the Teaching Commons but also **SOTL as a practice**.
Thank you!!

► **Definitely time for dessert!**