

2015

The More Things Change, The More They Stay The Same

Kathleen McKinney

Illinois State University, kmckinne@ilstu.edu

Recommended Citation

McKinney, Kathleen (2015) "The More Things Change, The More They Stay The Same," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 9: No. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijstl.2015.090102>

The More Things Change, The More They Stay The Same

Abstract

In this essay I argue the thesis that, although the field of SoTL has changed and grown somewhat over time, many issues, concerns, and practices remain stagnant and unresolved. I reflect on this thesis based on my SoTL career experiences, observations, and writings. Finally, I urge IJSOTL readers to question and address this thesis, and any implications.

Keywords

field of SoTL, issues in SoTL, history of SoTL, reflections on SoTL

Creative Commons License

Creative

Commons

Attribution-

Noncommercial-

No

Derivative

Works

4.0

License

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0](#)

license.

When invited to write another essay for IJSOTL, I hesitated, wondering on what to focus. But I realized that I had been doing some internal ‘talk,’ reflecting to myself (or with myself?) about my career in SoTL and the field of SoTL generally. In particular, over the last few years, I have found myself thinking, ‘the more things change, the more they stay the same.’ Thus, because I recently changed statuses from full-time faculty member to semi-retired and now move toward full retirement, I decided to share, briefly, some of these reflections with you—IJSOTL readers.

My own SoTL journey has been affected by a variety of contextual factors but that journey also serves as the historical and social context influencing my reflections here (and all good SoTLers share the context of their work). There are many ‘road trips’ to and through SoTL. Some of us share itineraries, vehicle choice, forks in the road, traffic jams, or rest areas; others have very different trips.

My journey, with some exceptions, has been U.S. based and spans 30 years. I began SoTL in the early to mid 1980s, before that term was created or used, writing about curriculum and advising in sociology as well as beginning to look at my teaching and student outcomes in my discipline. I shared that work at disciplinary conferences and in our pedagogical journal, *Teaching Sociology*. Similar to some of you, I began my SoTL road trip with scholarly teaching and classroom assessment then moved to more formal SoTL over time. This work led to many additional opportunities for SoTL service and research in both my institution across disciplines and within my discipline but beyond my institution. Somewhere along this journey, I veered off the well-traveled road of doing all or mostly traditional disciplinary work and moved on to a path focused primarily on SoTL. For the last 18 years, I have engaged almost exclusively in SoTL including my own research and writing, serving as Director of my institution’s teaching-learning center and, then, as the Cross Endowed Chair in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and becoming very active in this cross-discipline, international field.

As I look back on my trip within the context of the past and current field of SoTL, I see wonderful and exciting growth and change in the field. This includes, but is not limited to,

increased quality and recognition of our work; increased institutional and disciplinary support; innovative uses of technology to study learning and make SoTL public; the creation of new professional organizations and publication outlets; more inclusivity and diversity in terms of disciplines, theory, methodologies and nationalities; increased efforts at advocacy; recognition of alternative ways to represent SoTL work; balancing the discipline-based heart of SoTL with cross- and inter-disciplinary work; more conversations about application (McKinney & Jarvis, 2009, McKinney, 2012a, 2012b), 'transformation' (Gilpin & Liston, 2009) and 'authenticity' (Kreber, 2007); and maintaining SoTL as action and practioner research while moving studies and application beyond the classroom level.

Ironically, I also see and hear a great deal of repetition and redundancy over many years of the issues, debates, and problems of the field written about in publications and discussed at conferences and on campuses. The more things change, the more they stay the same. In 2002, twelve years after Boyer (1990) and 12 years before writing this essay, I wrote a speech for a campus SoTL ceremony (http://sotl.illinoisstate.edu/about/cross_chair/challenges_vision_s.shtml or McKinney, 2004). In that speech, I raised the following issues or challenges.

First, we still struggle with the meaning of SoTL and related terms. Is there a "best" definition? Do we need consensus on a definition? Is SoTL a "field?" How is SoTL related to traditional educational research? The challenge here is to both continue this conversation and to find a common ground that allows understanding and collaboration. Second, a challenge closely related to the first is to negotiate distinctions between related key terms: distinctions that impact support, evaluation and rewards. That is, though there are close connections among them, it is important to distinguish good teaching from scholarly teaching from the scholarship of teaching and learning." "Third, we have the challenge of synthesizing what we know, what we don't know, and what we need to know.

That is, we have the challenge of setting appropriate SoTL research agendas both within and across disciplinary boundaries. Fourth, there remain many barriers to doing and applying quality SoTL work. These barriers include, for example, conflicting institutional messages about the value and rewards for SoTL, insufficient training and development, lack of funding and other rewards, lack of knowledge by peers about how to evaluate SoTL work, colleagues who are “hostile” to SoTL work, and isolation of faculty doing SoTL from faculty members doing “traditional” research, etc.” “Finally, these challenges imply another, more general challenge. We must remind or inform others about why SoTL is so important.”

Many of these same issues were discussed with other Carnegie Scholars in my 2003-2004 cohort and, then, were still timely issues to address in my ‘how to’ SoTL book several years later in 2007 (McKinney, 2007). Step on the accelerator and speed ahead six more years to January 2013 when my edited book was published (McKinney, 2013). Though the focus of the book was limited to issues and examples of discipline-based and cross-discipline SoTL, a review of the chapters written by stellar SoTL scholars reveals discussion and work on the questions below. Again, we see some of the same themes from years past.

- What methods and assumptions are privileged in the field of SoTL?
- What is the history and current status of SoTL within a discipline?
- How can we use ideas from one discipline in the SoTL work within another?
- What are ‘appropriate’ ways to measure learning?
- What are the obstacles to doing SoTL including differing research paradigms?
- What are the myths about SoTL research and methodologies?
- How do we collaborate across disciplines and what are the barriers such as different ways of knowing?
- How do we do SoTL work and application at the institutional level?

As a founding member of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL), I have attended all ten ISSOTL conferences since the first in 2004 as well as numerous other SoTL or SoTL related conferences. I enjoy them immensely and always learn something new but, here too, so many of the same issues, problems, concerns, and ideas are discussed and presented every year. At the many campuses I have visited over the years to give workshops or keynotes, I am asked questions and hear conversations about the same issues. For example, we continue to debate the size of our 'tent' (Huber & Hutchings, 2005), to wonder and worry about value, reward, and institutional commitment, sometimes we reinvent the wheel in terms of SoTL questions studied or methodologies used without recognition of prior work, we talk about the barriers to collaboration and cross-discipline work, and we debate the quality and generalizability of the work (and/or whether those things matter in SoTL).

Perhaps it is not surprising --and even makes sense --that we both change as a field and are stalled as a field. This is likely true to varying degrees in other fields but SoTL is different in some ways from traditional disciplinary fields. The latter may have a somewhat more homogeneous membership with greater consensus on aspects of the discipline or field. New members are socialized to shared meanings, knowledge and norms in graduate school and throughout their careers in, most often, discipline-specific contexts. The place of SoTL in our academic life is more variable than that of our traditional disciplinary research. Groups of colleagues just earning their SoTL 'driver's licenses' seem to join the field more frequently and regularly and at all career stages compared to those new to a discipline and its traditional research. Yet, they cross some of the same bridges and experience similar potholes in the road as did those new to SoTL in prior years and, thus, contribute to 'the more things change, the more they stay the same' over time. Though other interdisciplinary fields may be more similar to SoTL than specific disciplinary fields, SoTL is still somewhat unique. The members of our field represent virtually all disciplines; whereas other interdisciplinary fields are often built from a limited range of, sometimes related, disciplines.

Where does this brief reflection take us? I challenge readers to consider several important questions. Is the 'more things change, the more they stay the same' a reality or simply my perception after many years in the field? Is the 'same' sufficiently balanced by the 'change'? If we are stranded on our road trip, is this problematic for the field or simply the way fields develop? Perhaps being temporarily stalled is actually a good thing, necessary to push us in new directions? If problematic, how so and what do we do about it? How can we shift the balance between 'same' and 'change', and move the field forward to new and exciting turns, destinations, and excursions?

References

- Boyer, E. L. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate*. Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Gilpin, L. S. and Liston, D. (2009). Transformative education in the scholarship of teaching and learning: An analysis of SoTL literature," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 3(2), 1-8.
- Huber, M. T. and Hutchings, P. (2005). *The Advancement of Learning: Building the Teaching Commons*. San Francisco, CA.: Jossey-Bass.
- Kreber, C. (2007). What's it really all about: The scholarship of teaching and learning as an authentic practice. *The International Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 1(1), 1-4.
- McKinney, K. (2004). The Scholarship of teaching and learning: Past lessons, current challenges, and future visions. *To Improve the Academy*, 22, 3-19.
- McKinney, K. (2007). *Enhancing learning through the scholarship of teaching and learning: The challenges and joys of juggling*. San Francisco, CA.: Jossey-Bass.

McKinney, K. and Jarvis, P. (2009). Beyond lines on the CV: Faculty applications of their scholarship of teaching and learning research. *International Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 3(1), 1-13.

McKinney, K. (2012a). Making a difference: Applying SoTL to enhance learning. *The Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 12(1), 1-7.

McKinney, K. (2012b). Increasing the impact of SoTL: Two sometimes neglected opportunities. *International Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 6(1), 1-6.

McKinney, K. (Ed.) (2013). *The scholarship of teaching and learning in and across the disciplines*. Bloomington, IN.: Indiana University Press.