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Why Should I Care About SOTL? The Professional Responsibilities of Post-Secondary Educators

Philip Pecorino

Queensborough Community College, P Pecorino@qcc.cuny.edu

Shannon Kincaid

Queensborough Community College, S Kincaid@qcc.cuny.edu

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Over the last decade, there has been tremendous growth in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) in post-secondary education. Yet, apart from a few significant exceptions, there has been very little discussion of the role this scholarship is to play in the professional activities of post-secondary educators. This essay defends the claim that as professional educators, all college professors have an ethical obligation to participate in SOTL. This participation entails both active research and scholarly review. On these grounds, SOTL is not an isolated slice of scholarly research; it is a necessary condition of post-secondary education.

Keywords

Scholarship of teaching and learning, SoTL, Professional educators

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Philip Pecorino Queensborough
Community College The City
University of New York
New York City, New York, USA
PPecorino@qcc.cuny.edu

Shannon Kincaid Queensborough
Community College The City
University of New York
New York City, New York, USA
SKincaid@qcc.cuny.edu

Abstract

Over the last decade, there has been tremendous growth in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) in post-secondary education. Yet, apart from a few significant exceptions, there has been very little discussion of the role this scholarship is to play in the professional activities of post-secondary educators. This essay defends the claim that as professional educators, all college professors have an ethical obligation to participate in SOTL. This participation entails both active research and scholarly review. On these grounds, SOTL is not an isolated slice of scholarly research; it is a necessary condition of post-secondary education.

"The art of life is (i) to live, (ii) to live well, (iii) to live better."
_ Alfred North Whitehead, *The Function of Reason* (1929)

The art of teaching is to teach, to teach well and to teach even better.

Introduction

In contemporary post-secondary education, there are two basic approaches to the scholarship of teaching and learning. On the one hand, there are those individuals who actively engage in scholarly research on pedagogical effectiveness and assessment. The efforts of these scholars are driven primarily by an individual commitment to effective teaching and a disciplinary commitment to effective pedagogy. In the interests of student recruitment and retention, administrators have invested heavily in the development of pedagogical research centers at college campuses around the world.

On the other hand, there are those faculty members who, while not necessarily opposed to SOTL, tend to see themselves as disinterested third parties in the growth of this type of scholarship. They teach their classes and participate in discipline-specific research without reference to SOTL. From their perspective, SOTL might be seen as an interesting "slice" of campus-wide scholarship, but one which does not have much bearing on the professional activities of most post-secondary educators.

These attitudes are often reflected in the literature of SOTL itself. While much has been written about improving pedagogical effectiveness and developing effective methods for assessment, there has been very little said about the relationship between SOTL and the professional responsibilities of post-secondary educators.

This work addresses these issues by demonstrating the fundamental necessity of SOTL in all forms of post-secondary education. As professional educators, college professors must always strive to improve their pedagogical effectiveness, not only to fulfill duties to students, their respective institutions and society, but also to further the profession itself. This pedagogical prerogative entails a duty on the part of all teaching faculty to stay informed of current research in SOTL, and to conduct original pedagogical research.

Post-Secondary Education as a Profession

The obligation of professors to engage in SOTL is predicated on the recognition of post-secondary education as a profession in and of itself. However, in both theory and practice, few college faculty identify themselves as educators, instead referring to themselves as disciplinary practitioners (philosophers, sociologists, etc.).

As educators, all college faculty are members of two professions. They are both professional scholars and professional educators. And this dual identity has significant implications for the duties of post-secondary faculty members, including duties that many college professors simply do not (or will not) accept. These duties include (but are not limited to) the professional duty to conduct research and experimentation in pedagogy.

Are college professors “professional” educators? In his *Professional Ethics* (Wadsworth, 1981, p. 3), Michael D. Bayles identifies a profession as an activity which satisfies the following criteria:

Necessary Conditions of a Profession

1. Extensive training
2. Significant intellectual component
3. Provision of important service to society

Common Features of a Profession

1. certification and/or licensing, both external and internal
2. organization of members
3. professional autonomy

Bayles then distinguishes between two fundamental categories of profession: Consulting and Scholarly. The criteria for the consulting professions are:

- Individual clients
- Provision of a service related to basic values [of society]
- Monopoly or near monopoly
- Self regulation

Professionals in the first category include (but are not limited too) physicians, attorneys, social workers, and architects. The second category includes the salaried professions. This category includes teachers, engineers, scientists, and journalists.

Yet the “profession of professor” in some ways transcends these categories, and demonstrates the limits of the Bayles’ consulting/scholarly distinction. His distinction, while important, cannot capture fully the unique roles of the post-secondary educator. In other words, professors are not professional scholars and researchers dabbling in “amateur” pedagogy, and they do not have the option of ignoring pedagogy and SOTL. This point is recognized by the [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13144&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html) < http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13144&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html >(UNESCO):

“Teaching in higher education is a profession: it is a form of public service that requires of higher education personnel expert knowledge and specialized skills acquired and maintained through rigorous and lifelong study and research; it also calls for a sense of personal and institutional responsibility for the education and welfare of students and of the community at large and for a commitment to high professional standards in scholarship and research.”

As a professional educator subject to these sorts of ethical obligations, college professors must not only have expert training in their disciplines; they must also commit to the larger set of responsibilities stemming from their role as educators. All professors teach, whether they stand in front of a roomful of freshman or supervise graduate research. And as professional educators, they have an obligation to participate in pedagogical research.

The Professor as Professional Educator

While some professors might reject being characterized as professional educators, there are numerous examples of the degree to which college professors do accept this characterization. College faculty are quick to resist efforts to influence their selection of texts, teaching devices, methodologies and instructional design claiming, and rightly so, that it has long been the prerogative of individual faculty members to determine how to teach their courses, and to make these judgments on their experience, the learners they are dealing with, their own teaching styles, and the context in which they are offering instruction. They assert that it is their right to make such decisions. Invoking a right to pedagogical decision-making is not a product of a specific academic discipline; it is the result of prerogatives vested in professional educators who are given the right, and often the exclusive right, to make academic judgments as to what produces the most effective pedagogy.

As professional educators, faculty members are subject to strict codes of conduct and ethical standards in the classroom. The American Association of University Professors has policy statements and a Code of Professional Ethics that relate to members of the professoriate as educators and scholars. The following is excerpted from the AAUP “[Statement on Professional Ethics](http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/statementonprofessionalethics.htm)”: < <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/statementonprofessionalethics.htm> >

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“Professors, guided by a deep conviction of the worth and dignity of the advancement of knowledge, recognize the special responsibilities placed upon them. Their primary responsibility to their subject is to seek and to state the truth as they see it. To this end professors devote their energies to developing and improving their scholarly competence. They accept the obligation to exercise critical self-discipline and judgment in using, extending, and transmitting knowledge... They protect their academic freedom... As members of an academic institution, professors seek above all to be effective teachers and scholars...

To be “effective teachers and scholars,” professional educators must engage in an effort to improve upon the effectiveness of pedagogical practices. Thus, post-secondary educators must strive to teach, to teach well, and to teach even better.

Instructors might teach well, but students change creating a need to make adjustments to address those changes. There will be changes in the academic disciplines being taught, and in pedagogical approaches to different subjects and disciplines. Instructors at any level and in any type of institutional setting who do not vary the content or the manner of their instruction over years, even decades, are not teaching well.

The responsibility to further the profession of post-secondary education applies not only to effective teaching, but also to the mentoring and support of colleagues. The supportive relationship of educator to professional colleague partly fulfills the duty to improve pedagogical effectiveness.

The preparation and practice of educators will vary with discipline and institution. Professionals may not always hold peers accountable to the same degree, depending on context. These obligations may vary in requiring, evaluating and enforcing the fulfillment of responsibilities, but these variations do not dissolve the fundamental obligation of all professional post-secondary educators to teach as well as they can.

The responsibilities of professional educators also vary with the institutional setting, the level of education, and the discipline. And while the duties of a college professor teaching introductory classes differ from the duties of a professor directing graduate research, at bottom there remains a common set of pedagogical duties, including a commitment to pedagogical research.

The responsibilities of professional educators are generated both from duties an educator acquires through voluntary entry into the profession and the basic human obligation to cause no harm. It is the latter that serves as a check on the potential excesses a professional might commit in overzealous attempts to serve the interests of the profession while losing sight of the wider set of basic interests of those served by the profession and their basic rights, including that of not being harmed.

Split Personalities: The Professor as Scholar and Educator

Discussions of pedagogy and research in post-secondary education inevitably raise issues of workload. Do professors have an obligation to conduct pedagogical research above and beyond their duties to conduct scholarly research, write, publish, present, teach, grade,

design courses, advise, mentor, as well as serve on committees and contribute to the community? Ours is a hectic profession, and Dan Bernstein and Randy Bass rightly recognize the implications of an increased administrative emphasis on pedagogy in colleges and universities. Bernstein and Bass attempt to provide terms and contexts in which conversations about workload might take place. But they note that work done as SOTL...

"...may not be, in the end, quite like any other kind of work in the academy: it is a hybrid between teaching and research, it is both local and cosmopolitan, and it is both individual and collaborative. Accommodating ourselves and our institutions to the scholarship of teaching and learning (by whatever name) may require our coming to terms with this uniqueness and finding new structures and practices for it." ("The Scholarship of Teaching & Learning")
 < <http://www.aaup.org/publications/Academe/2005/05ja/05jabass.htm> >

Advances in the disciplines and in technology, along with the changing role of the university in contemporary society, have had a profound effect on faculty workload. Further, at many colleges, tenure and promotion decisions are based on scholarly achievement, teaching, and college service. The teaching portion of this triad is often judged solely on the basis of student and peer evaluations, if not simply on a lack of student complaints. This is likely to be significantly altered as SOTL changes the notion of effective teaching. Faculty, particularly at teaching institutions, will need to demonstrate clear evidence of pedagogical research and a commitment to improvement in pedagogical methods. This significant change can only be reasonably expected of and accepted by faculty if the notion of "scholarship" is enlarged to include SOTL. As Bernstein and Bass argue, this means recognizing the need for disseminating SOTL and the importance of doing so through expanded notions of publication and college service.

To produce SOTL and to advance post-secondary pedagogy, there is a duty to explore more effective pedagogies through experimentation. This duty is fulfilled in both formal and informal ways. Experimentation can be conducted simply on the grounds of improved teaching, without the intent for widespread dissemination, and without formal research. These experiments might involve just one group of learners and may involve no more than the change of a lesson plan or textbook or the redesign of a curriculum or a change in a teaching method or device. On the other hand, educators can design formal research with human subjects, the results of which are intended to be widely disseminated and to be replicated by other researchers and subject to formal IRB review.

The professional post-secondary educator has a duty to communicate the results of formal or informal pedagogic research. This can be accomplished through means of dissemination that are formal or informal, including SOTL publication and presentation (including presentations and publications in both print and electronic journals), conversations with friends and colleagues, luncheon discussions, presentations at departmental meetings, etc. Formal dissemination includes publication in print and electronic journals.

Lee Shulman, President of the [Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching](http://www.carnegiefoundation.org) <<http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/index.asp>> speaks of the "pedagogic imperative" that includes the obligation to inquire into the consequences of work with learners. For Shulman "teaching is an intentional, designed act undertaken to influence the minds of others, and change the world in an intensely intimate, socially responsible manner." (Foreward, <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/dynamic/publications/ethics_of_inq-fore.pdf > *Ethics of Inquiry*). He states that it brings with it "inexorable responsibilities" and argues that

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educators can teach with integrity only if they make efforts to examine their efficacy as educators. Educators are responsible for the efficacy of what they do as educators, regardless of the level of education.

Conclusion

While it is important to provide students with knowledge necessary for competency, a college education must also provide students with the ability to analyze, to understand, and to apply the theories, practices and values learned in the classroom to the labs, classrooms, boardrooms, and the offices of their respective occupations. Post-secondary educators, as members of two professions, are responsible for conveying a commitment to inquiry in both their respective academic disciplines and in pedagogical practice. In accomplishing the latter, faculty need to review the effectiveness of instruction and devise and apply innovations to maintain and advance effectiveness in light of changing circumstances and to report those findings. On these grounds, SOTL is a fundamental obligation of all post-secondary educators who, as professionals, want to teach, teach well, and teach even better.