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# What's It Really All About? The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning as an Authentic Practice

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# What's It Really All About? The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning as an Authentic Practice

## Abstract

**Excerpt:** For this inaugural issue of *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning*, Alan Altany asked me to contribute a short essay on ‘some aspect of, or approach to, SoTL that is significant internationally today’. This assignment invites numerous possible responses given that significant issues in relation to higher education pedagogy abound. For starters, it is widely acknowledged that the challenges of the twenty-first century require higher education institutions to prepare not only discipline specialists but independent thinkers, productive citizens, and future leaders (e.g., Baxter Magolda and Terenzini, 1999). In this context Baxter Magolda (1999) argues that students need to develop a certain intellectual (as well as intra- and inter-personal) maturity to deal adequately with the various challenges of our times and suggests that higher education pedagogies should be designed such that they promote what she calls student “self-authorship”.

## Keywords

Higher education pedagogy, Scholarship of teaching and learning

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**What's it really all about?  
The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning as an Authentic Practice**

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For this inaugural issue of *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning*, Alan Altany asked me to contribute a short essay on 'some aspect of, or approach to, SoTL that is significant internationally today'. This assignment invites numerous possible responses given that significant issues in relation to higher education pedagogy abound. For starters, it is widely acknowledged that the challenges of the twenty-first century require higher education institutions to prepare not only discipline specialists but independent thinkers, productive citizens, and future leaders (e.g., Baxter Magolda and Terenzini, 1999). In this context Baxter Magolda (1999) argues that students need to develop a certain intellectual (as well as intra- and inter-personal) maturity to deal adequately with the various challenges of our times and suggests that higher education pedagogies should be designed such that they promote what she calls student "self-authorship".

The change from elite to mass higher education (to universal access) in many countries has direct implications for SoTL. Widening participation agendas, though welcomed by many, bring with it multiple challenges with regards to pedagogy. Higher education 'for all' involves changing traditional approaches to teaching and assessment practices so that not only 'all' get admitted into our programs but 'all' also have a fair chance to succeed.

These days most countries witness heightened pressures with regards to quality assurance and there is no reason to believe that these will diminish in the years to come. Robust internal quality assurance mechanisms may be needed to promote public confidence in our work without abdicating institutional autonomy. SoTL could play a vital role in this regard. For all of these and other reasons, Huber and Hutchings (2005) remarked recently that SoTL is an imperative today and not a choice.

Although there is a tendency, at least in some quarters, to view SoTL exclusively as discipline-specific pedagogical inquiry into how students learn, it is increasingly recognized that it is equally important that SoTL engage with broader agendas and consider questions relating to the larger learning experience of students (e.g, Kreber, 2005). As well, Huber and Hutchings (2005) proposed that it might be more appropriate to espouse a "big tent" conceptualization of SoTL, one that recognizes next to pedagogical research within particular disciplines or programs also much more modest or small-scale efforts aimed at reflecting on one's own classroom teaching and sharing what was learned as a way of engaging with this kind of work.

Underlying the above considerations is an engagement with the question of "what is *it* -- namely the student learning experience in higher education --, and SoTL -- the scholarship whose goal is to enhance *it* --, *really all about?*" My intent in this short essay is to explore this somewhat further and in doing so introduce the notion of

SoTL as an 'authentic practice'.

In one of the most insightful books on higher education pedagogy published within this decade, Parker Palmer (1998) argues that learning is enhanced and supported by teachers who have the capacity to generate community between themselves and their 'subject', between themselves and students, and eventually between students and the 'subject'. The key to good university teaching, he proposes, is not that it is 'student-centered' but that it is 'subject-centered'. In a subject-centered classroom, teachers succeed in conveying to students not only their enthusiasm for the subject but also how and why the subject *matters*.

Importantly, Palmer puts forward the idea that teachers who succeed in building this vital connection between the subject matter and students, are those who have found their "integrity". By the latter he means "that I discern what is integral to my selfhood, what fits and what does not,.... It means becoming more real by acknowledging the whole of who I am" (p. 13). Elsewhere in the book he suggests "No matter how technical my subject may be, the things I teach are things I care about—and what I care about helps define my selfhood" (p. 17). My sense is that Palmer's language has too much of a 'soft touch' for many academics to be read widely. Yet, few would deny that their personal life is inextricably linked to their academic one and that they partially define themselves by their academic interests or subject matter. This does not mean that there is no private life outside of academe, but rather that the subject matter, which often is the field we carry out research in, *matters* to us also beyond the walls of the university, and when we teach it we, therefore, share parts of ourselves with students. An alternative term for what Palmer means may be "authenticity".

In exploring the notion of authenticity, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (1991) suggested that authentic identities can be constructed only against a background of issues that matter crucially. For Taylor, the demands of nature, the needs of our fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship are all examples of issues that could qualify as a horizon of significance. Clearly, the horizon of significance has to be something substantial, something that deeply matters not just for oneself but for society as a whole. When applying the concept of a horizon of significance to our work as college and university teachers, we may ask 'what is this thing, this issue, which *matters crucially*'?

Most readers would likely respond that what *matters crucially* is that students, while attending our institutions, have a learning experience that is worthwhile and promotes their learning and development. Ensuring that this happens could be conceived of as a horizon of significance within which to define ourselves as teachers and orient our practice. Additionally, there is also another horizon of significance that comes to bear in college and university teaching, one that is different from yet hinges on the first. Consider again the value most university teachers place on the subject matter they are engaged in and through which they partially define themselves. This subject matter is not just a 'prescribed curriculum' that needs to be conveyed to students, but it matters crucially to us and by sharing it with our students we also bring parts of ourselves into our teaching. Surely, at times the course material is quite removed from our academic and personal interest but this does not make that subject matter irrelevant or unimportant. And if it is important, it is essential that students are being made aware of how and why it is important. Recognizing this tension, Elton (2000) argued: "While teaching that becomes merely

a technical service to consumers may be a form of prostitution, teaching that is always accompanied by our own ...passion for a subject matter in which we are wholly engaged is in danger of putting self-love above duty....to our students” (p. 260). Taylor’s and Palmer’s work would suggest that authenticity in teaching involves our caring about the subject balanced and enriched by our caring about what is in the important interest of students.

It would follow that scholars of teaching and learning explore how to create the vital connection between themselves and the ‘subject’, themselves and students, and students and the ‘subject’. This includes developing an informed sense of why particular content areas *matter*, an understanding of why students may not yet see why these *matter*, and sensibilities around and skill in helping them understand why they *matter*. Given the challenges of our times, the ‘subject’ needs to be understood more broadly, including next to the knowledge, skills and attitudes specific to particular subject areas, the much needed generic knowledge areas and skills necessary for students to participate effectively in their later civic, professional and personal lives. Furthermore, genuine dialogue, as emphasized by many scholars discussing the nature of authenticity and authentic relationships (for example Martin Buber, Carl Rogers, Paulo Freire or Nel Noddings), at the level of higher education, is dialogue that centers on *ideas* that matter. Some of these ideas are specific to particular subjects while others are more generic (for example, the nature of relativistic and contextual knowing, or cross-cultural understanding). To a large extent SoTL then indeed has to do with better understanding how students learn but it seems equally important that in defining SoTL we turn the lens also on ourselves, that is, on those who are doing the teaching, and by extension on the content of the curriculum and co-curriculum we provide.

Finally, an important question we need to address is whether the ‘scholarship of teaching and learning’ is in the important interest of students. Grimmet and Neufeld (1994) introduced a model that distinguishes three possible motivations of teachers: the traditional, the alternative, and the authentic. Applied to the higher education context, their model suggests that faculty, and others with teaching responsibilities, are motivated by traditional incentives when they do what is *rewarded*. They are motivated by alternative incentives when they do what they themselves see as *rewarding*. Finally, when their motivation is grounded in authenticity they do what is *‘good’*. Following Taylor, the authors propose that “authentic motivation is ... caught up in a struggle to do what is necessary and of value, not just for the organization nor just for oneself, but ultimately in the important interests of learners” (p.5).

What’s it really all about? Ideally we would like to see SoTL *rewarded* within our disciplines and institutions, be *rewarding* for ourselves, and, perhaps most centrally, be in the *important interest of students*. The moment any one of these three criteria or attributes is missing, the relevance of SoTL becomes questionable. The opportunity exists for ‘IJ-SoTL’ to grow into an important vehicle for establishing SoTL as an ‘authentic practice’. This is achieved when the articles that appear there *not only* will be read by many and be rewarded as serious scholarship, and the contributors to the studies reported --both teachers and students-- *not only* will find their efforts rewarding, but also, and crucially, when their work is geared towards building vital bridges between themselves, their students and the ‘subject matter’ (*broadly conceived*), so that SoTL will succeed in enriching the student learning experience.

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## Notes

The ideas expressed in this article are discussed more fully in Kreber, C. et al., 'What do you mean by authentic? A review of the literature on conceptions of authenticity in teaching', presently under review with the *Adult Education Quarterly* and in Kreber, C. 'Exploring the notion of university teaching excellence in Canada. An interrogation of common practices and policies', in press with A. Skelton (ed), *International perspectives on teaching excellence in higher education*. London, New York: Routledge.