

The scholarship of teaching and learning: what works, and why

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Disciplinary experts have a responsibility to engage in nuanced thinking about teaching and learning.

Recently, I had a conversation with a colleague that stopped me dead in my tracks. I was in the middle of extolling the virtues of SoTL (the scholarship of teaching and learning) as a research field that is multidisciplinary, accessible and increasingly relevant as we shape what higher education looks like in the 21st century.

Feeling the wonderful effects of a mid-afternoon caffeine rush, I was exclaiming that SoTL has wide appeal for many members of our learning community and provides: 1) support to inform teaching practices; 2) fresh solutions and new ideas, such as how to jump-start a sluggish class or reach the latest generation of students or harness a new technology; 3) opportunities for cross-fertilization between research and teaching; and 4) the option to develop a secondary research field without costly infrastructure.

Confident that I was on a roll, I explained that the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and other funding agencies have increased opportunities for exploring teaching and learning in higher education.

Furthermore, institutional factors – from evaluation committees and collective agreements to senate research committees and strategic research plans – are starting to acknowledge and even encourage SoTL as a rigorous research field not just for educational developers but also for faculty from a wide range of disciplines.

My proselytizing came to a grinding halt, however, when my colleague asked, “Why would a professor of English literature, for example, have any right to conduct research on teaching and learning since merely teaching a few classes in your area of expertise doesn’t make you an expert on teaching?”

Cue panicked inner monologue: “Am I an imposter? What do I know about teaching and learning? Am I appropriating a huge body of well-established literature and research? How can I hope to participate in a nuanced and rigorous way?”

And then I took a deep breath. That afternoon my response was simply that, as scholars, we have the ability to transcend content in order to deploy analytical tools to ask questions about the world around us and our place within it. Moreover, who better to study how English literature students learn than English professors, since they must deploy disciplinary knowledge in order to first identify what students need to learn and then measure how and if they are learning.

However, I kept returning to this question in the days that followed. I was unsettled that my colleague’s assumption – that research related to teaching and learning should be left to education experts – might be pervasive, perhaps even systemic. So, like any scholar, I did two things: I did some research and consulted my colleagues.

First, a review of the literature confirmed that SoTL is a diverse and dynamic field. Although SoTL has traditionally been dominated by the social sciences (with a focus on learning and cognition), faculty members from across the disciplines are using their own methodological expertise to explore complex issues in higher education. For example, some of the leading experts on problem-based learning are faculty members of medical schools, while members of business faculties are exploring ways to enhance entrepreneurialism through experiential learning.

Second, consultation with colleagues from diverse backgrounds revealed that familiarity with and participation in SoTL is uneven. SoTL is a topic where, depending on the audience, you are either preaching to the converted or a lone voice in the wilderness. While one of my colleagues did not know what SoTL stood for, another expressed

disbelief that my aforementioned colleague could espouse such antiquated assumptions.

The consensus, however, was that disciplinary experts have the right, perhaps even the responsibility, to engage in careful and nuanced thinking about teaching and learning – why we do things, what works and how we can create positive change. As one colleague so aptly stated, “To delegitimize investigation of classroom practice is to ignore the role that the classroom plays in shaping our culture and the values we espouse beyond the classroom.”

SoTL provides us with the opportunity to hold a lens up to all spheres of our professional lives – teaching, service, educational leadership, administration, research, community outreach, etc. – for exploration and analysis. While not all of us wish to pursue SoTL, these scholarly endeavours should be recognized as legitimate avenues of inquiry, available to all, and valued accordingly.