How do YOU SoTL: The Past, Present, and Future of Writing about SoTL

As most readers are likely aware, in 1990, Ernest Boyer issued a challenge to higher education; one that struck deep at the epistemological heart of the culture of higher education (Schon, 1995). Within the challenge, he developed a framework for scholarship that differentiated traditional research, the scholarship of discovery, from three other types, application/engagement, integration, and teaching. The latter, now commonly known by its SoTL acronym, has perhaps made the most progress towards defining itself as a field of inquiry and toward creating a functioning community among its practitioners (McKinney, 2004). This existence and persistence of this journal is an example of the establishment of the field of SoTL as both a national and international subject.

That assessment is a relative one and although SoTL has made great strides, there are many unresolved questions in the field, from reward and recognition, peer review, and others, even among the most recognized SoTL experts (Kreber, 2002). Despite these lingering questions, publication in SoTL has become increasingly uniform. The classic SoTL study follows a particular organization, which includes a question based on classroom practice, a literature review, an empirical study, an analysis of the findings of that study, and then a reflection on the meaning of those findings. It is perhaps no surprise that this formula is well familiar to social scientists and to educational researchers. Scholars in these areas were among the first to embrace the emerging field of study, and they offered their research tools to others. It could not have hurt that empirical studies, grounded in quantitative analysis, supported the credibility of the emerging field and created a bulwark against the inevitable critical backlash. The net effect, though, of this perception of how SoTL has done has worked against creating a broad community of practitioners and has, in effect, narrowed the field. Those with social science research skills have naturally gravitated towards the new area, while those researchers in fields with other research tools have faced greater obstacles to entry. Proponents of ‘SoTL as genre’ might argue that it has deepened the understanding of the field among experts and allowed for more consistent assessment of quality. In other words, breadth has been sacrificed for depth, but that may not be such a bad outcome.
On the other hand, if we can agree that teaching and learning are diverse and multi-talent activities, so it would stand to reason that a similar perspective should characterize how we write about those activities. In other words, if “teaching is not a normative science,” as Diana Laurillard claims, then why do we tend to assess, and therefore, write about it as if it is, using tools developed specifically for that purpose?  

While the list of appropriate methodological approaches that fall under the SoTL umbrella has certainly been growing, educational researchers, including cognitive psychologists, have led the pack and their pronouncement of what constitutes quality research have often (albeit unintentionally) drowned out other voices (Hubball and Clarke, 2010; Weimar 2006). Within that din, though, a growing number of scholars are clamoring for SoTL to become inclusive of the tools that characterize many different disciplines, often far afield from the classic social science education model (Hutchings, 2007). Rather than trembling at such a prospect, it is possible that such a diversity of voices will not result in discord and disorder, as the Wiki-U article attests. Rather, this issue of MountainRise is intended to suggest that multiple voices can produce a form of controlled creative chaos, a cornucopia rather than a cacophony.

Teaching and learning are not only diverse practices, they are to some extent unique and ineffable ones. The heart of SoTL inquiry is the discipline, which serves as an indelibly colored lens through which we all view our practice. I am, by training, an historian and we often teeter on the brink between humanities and social sciences. You may be familiar with George Castaneda’s quote, “those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it;” students frequently cite this idea as a reason for pursuing the study of history. On the other hand, the contemporary philosophy of academic history is fundamentally rooted in the humanities. We spurn Castaneda’s ideas in favor of reveling in the singularity and ephemeral nature of historical events. Like other disciplines in the humanities, though, this leaves us with a dilemma about defending the relevance of historical study in the accountability climate of modern academia. If it does not repeat itself, then how is the study of history relevant or worthwhile? What if you substitute the word

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“teaching” for the word “history” in these preceding questions? Perhaps teaching and learning and therefore, SoTL may not simply be the domain of the social sciences.

Many have valiantly sought to articulate answers to these questions about the humanities, and sometimes those that resonate most deeply, such as the beauty and essential humanity that is deeply embedded in these fields, do not hold as much water with its detractors. The reasons many of us love teaching and learning and yearn to think deeply about it are not always those that will satisfy conventional standards of scholarship. Matthew Rave’s essay presents an interesting case in point. Though reviewers praised its insight, several were left wondering if such a piece, with its absence of empirical basis, could really constitute SoTL. It may be time to consider closing this metaphorical loop and finding ways to appreciate not only multiple forms of scholarship, but multiple forms of expressing that scholarship.

One historian called his colleagues “amateurs in the operating room” when it came to SoTL, but that metaphorical operating room may not be the only place in which meaning-making and knowledge creation take place within teaching and learning (Pace, 2004). Historians have found it helpful to conceptualize history not so much as an operating room but as a laboratory for the human condition, one that shows us the range of what we are capable of, and allows us to consider conditions that do not currently exist.² A healthy appreciation for alternatives and ‘paths less travelled by’ is an attitude also engendered by many SoTL studies, but it is one that could perhaps be more productively applied to its scholarly products.

One example of these roads less travelled by is the format and organization of SoTL. For example, historical writing is fundamentally about narrative—the story. Those of us who are not professional historians may find scholarly historical writing has gotten somewhat esoteric, dry, and jargon-heavy, but even with these limitations, the driving force of the interpretative structure is the narrative.³ Most works of


history use sophisticated and varied methodology, for example, but historical works do not usually contain
lengthy descriptions of these methods. Rather, they are allowed to speak for themselves, to emerge in a
sense, through the story that is being reconstructed and interpreted. Kevin Yee and Jace Hargis, neither
of whom are historians, practice something similar in their piece, *Jumping Head First.* Rather than
performing post-mortem analysis of the results of the study, they choose instead to concentrate on the
opposite poles of inquiry and application that came before and after the more conventional analysis. The
result is a piece that closely mimics the instructors’ own transformative journey in both form and function.
Maria Moore’s piece takes this even a step further and places SoTL on a different platform, both literally
and figuratively. She does not simply eschew the classic social science formula, but challenges even its
basis in the linearity of the printed page, by intertwining her study, the researcher, and the audience
through multimedia. Her work explicitly challenges the passive reader to become a more active
participant in constructing meaning from her scholarship.

The gradual switch from passive to active learning should sound familiar to those of us who swept up the
“learning-centered” revolution that has galvanized contemporary higher education. SoTL has served as a
significant catalyst for this process, but in doing so has neglected to embrace the same principles of
teaching and learning that it has championed. The primary purpose of a community of scholars is, after
all, teaching and learning for its participants. If faced with a room full of faculty from diverse disciplines, is
the classic social science study how you would choose to reach them? What do you think would be the
most effective way to reach them? Just as there is no single right way to teach, there may be no single
right way to do SoTL. The question of how do you SoTL could be as unique, metaphorically speaking, as
your own fingerprints.


