



Defining and supporting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL): A sector-wide study

SoTL case studies

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Engaging staff in SoTL

Main issue

By engaging staff in purposive reflection, assessment and analysis of teaching and learning in a public way, the benefits of SoTL, such as improved learning, teaching and professional development outcomes, can be enhanced. However, irrespective of type of higher education provider (HEP), all institutions face similar challenges in engaging staff in SoTL.

Illustration

Facilitating leadership and engagement in SoTL requires strategic processes that build capacity and promote relevant cultural changes. Confidence-building, advocacy and broadening the range of staff involved, are some of the strategies that have worked in some institutions. As one Head of Academic Development suggested, the institution:

...has taken a fresh approach... We are going through a confidence-building period... So we recognise that we are perhaps gifted amateurs and we're trying to be a bit more professional and systematic about things. And I think for me... its systematising and basically to try and raise the game of everyone across the institution so SoTL becomes a bit more embedded in the culture of academic practice so it's not seen as a nice to do, it's just part of what we all do.

A range of stakeholders are required for SoTL promotion, implementation and advocacy. The conscious broadening of staff as stakeholders in the recognition of the bigger role different staff can play in SoTL advancement is important. Non-teaching staff (learning technology-related, student support, library and diversity) typically engage in SoTL work that is often not widely shared and publicised. Supporting the dissemination of SoTL research is seen as important for advocacy and incentivising staff where staff engagement is still a challenge. Clear signposting of the value, benefits and impacts supports staff engagement.

Implication for policy and practice

Policymakers and practitioners concerned with learning and teaching enhancement need to recognise and broaden the range of staff involved in, as well as provide support for the dissemination of SoTL research to incentivise staff and share knowledge and good practice. This has to be underpinned by a dual focus on building capacity and institutional cultures that assist engagement.

Loci, processes and activities for institutions

Main issue

Clear institutional loci for academic development and clear reporting structures enable the promotion of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) across a whole institution. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' as institutions differ in their makeup, missions and priorities. Key challenges include instituting the necessary cultural shifts and identifying institutional features (structural loci of change leads, processes and activities) that enable the embedding of SoTL.

Illustration

Heads of Academic Development from a range of UK higher education providers (HEPs) suggested that successful SoTL embedding within their institutions involved strategically locating the functions promoting

institutional change within stand-alone academic development units and/or with other research centres. One suggested:

...we implement it in two spaces... We operate in that operational logistics space... Our personal origins, if you like, is the sort of weaving and winding of the HE journey so working together in different spaces in different places within the institution so there's a matrix holding that together as well as personal background [and] personal intent...

SoTL is promoted, led and implemented in diverse structural spaces within the institution, inhabited by individuals from varied backgrounds and different personal intent who create matrices of assorted SoTL arrangements.

SoTL is embedded in institutional practices through a range of processes and activities that include supportive structures, such as leadership, policies, strategies, schemes, dedicated resources and persons, and financed initiatives. Internal schemes to get people started, recognised, rewarded and promoted; postgraduate certificates in higher education; regular SoTL-focused events with or without external speakers; pedagogic research conferences; writing retreats; in-house journals; capacity building networks; communities of practice; and grants for small innovative projects; are other examples. Working in partnership with students is also key to embedding SoTL practice. Active student participation and inputs into evaluation processes, curriculum and course co-design, revalidation panels, research networks and academic manifestos are some of the strategies employed to facilitate student voice and engagement with SoTL.

Implication for policy and practice

The need for different institutional mechanisms to initiate, embed and maintain SoTL suggests that institutional structures, processes and activities for SoTL are best considered as matrices of different functions. Attention is needed to identify the most appropriate loci, processes and activities to embed SoTL, making sure that these different spaces and approaches are 'joined-up'.

Promotion criteria

Main issue

Promotion criteria have been singled out as a key issue in aligning SoTL with professional recognition, value and reward. Heads of Academic Development report that there are tensions between the value of SoTL and the value of discipline-based research. This plays out in promotion criteria and outcomes. These tensions are heightened in institutions positioning themselves as more research-intensive which require institutional and disciplinary cultural shifts to align learning and teaching policy to promotion procedures.

Illustration

For some higher education providers, professional development and recognition schemes have provided a very strong basis for embedding the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) across their institutions through promotion criteria. Other attempts have been made to link SoTL directly to promotion, for example, linking promotion to Boyer's (1990) models of scholarships. One institution had explicit SoTL promotion routes leading to professorships. Academic developers also report having productive conversations with their Human Resource (HR) departments about embedding SoTL practice in promotion criteria. This illustrates the opportunities promotion criteria present for institutionalising SoTL principles.

While some institutions have made some inroads into aligning SoTL to promotion criteria, others report that there continues to be challenges in this area as a greater value is attached to promotion based on discipline-based research. This has resulted in greater attention paid to research rather than teaching excellence in promotions decisions. As one Head of Academic Development suggested:

...behind the public proclamations, the schools still value... subject-based research to pedagogic research more highly than learning and teaching and individual academics know for a fact that currently if they want to get promotion they need to be good researchers rather than good practitioners.

Implications for policy and practice

Promotional routes through learning and teaching practice, while publicly supported through policy statements, are, in practice, more difficult to navigate. A more concerted effort is needed to align policy aims with outcomes and translate intent into reality to redress the inflection on subject-based research in promotions. Professional development and recognition schemes can incentivise SoTL practice when combined with favourable promotion criteria developed in conjunction with HR professionals.

Supporting the dissemination of SoTL research

Main issue

Although the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning has advanced over time, dissemination of the research it produces remains a challenge. This is due to issues of time, resources and the availability of appropriate conduits. In many institutions a range of individuals are involved in SoTL research; these include academics and professionals in central services or student support, library services or diversity departments. However, too often those categories of staff do not share their work publicly, thus limiting the potential for sharing evidence and impact of their research.

Illustration

Academic developers cite many examples of how dissemination has been undertaken within their institutions. These include hosting an international journal on SoTL research; presenting papers at conferences; and sharing through networks and communities of practice papers. Sharing SoTL research aids those beginning their journeys into teaching. Dissemination of SoTL research is also seen as important for advocacy and incentivising staff where staff engagement is still a challenge. It also enables institutions to signal the importance of involving a broad range of staff in SoTL. Dissemination provides a vehicle for demonstrating impact, persuading institutions and staff of its benefits, value, and impact.

In articulating improvements, issues of advocacy and the role individuals and organisations can play in disseminating SoTL research, are mentioned. What is needed in terms of advocacy, resources, support and capacity building is a range of strategies that include funding, support of communities of practice, online repositories and other online outlets. This can further interdisciplinary and inter-institutional exchange that facilitates the sharing of good practice. Fledgling attempts to include SoTL in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) submissions are also appearing.

Implication for policy and practice

Effective dissemination approaches need to consider creative, traditional and online opportunities for sharing practice and to influence policy for change. Considering synergies with the Research Excellence Framework (REF) presents another avenue for SoTL dissemination.

SoTL as discipline-specific and interdisciplinary work

Main issue

An important goal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is to facilitate learning by investigating discipline-specific features and effective pedagogic practice. Many practitioners of SoTL work across

disciplines. SoTL practice, therefore, implies discipline-specific work and interdisciplinary crossovers. However, transferring learning and teaching findings across disciplines can be challenging and specific explicit strategies must be used to enable this transfer. Heads of Academic Development report that there are certain issues faced by particular disciplines that are specific to their disciplinary cultures.

Illustration

In a changing context of increasingly transnational and technology-mediated teaching and learning environments, both interdisciplinary and disciplinary approaches to SoTL offer different benefits. Processes involved in building scholarship within different disciplines highlight issues of disciplinary politics, culture, centrality and applicability. It is helpful to provide discipline-centred examples of SoTL practice as discipline epistemologies shape perspectives of what is possible. Real examples should be communicated to help engage academics in SoTL. At present SoTL engagement tends to reflect an individual's interests rather than a discipline.

Nevertheless, Heads of Academic Development also stress that irrespective of disciplinary context it is possible that others may have solved similar issues; and the benefits of consensus- and community-building engendered by SoTL learning across disciplines can represent an important asset for institutions. HEPs should therefore consider strategic integration and embedding of SoTL. Resultant communities of practice can advance common SoTL agendas and align disciplines to SoTL principles and practice. While the discipline remains the preferred locus for investigation, reflection and improved practices, much is to be gained from SoTL interdisciplinary crossovers and exchange of ideas. As stated by an Academic Developer, similar issues apply across disciplines:

In my experience there are very few issues in learning and teaching which are only applicable to one discipline.

Yet, getting buy-in from schools and engaging staff and departments often requires providing examples drawn from the same discipline and may lead to a sense of 'reinventing the wheel'.

Implication for policy and practice

Institutional policy and practice aimed at redressing the tensions between discipline and interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning scholarship need to better exploit the added value of integration, consensus-building and efficiency benefits of interdisciplinary approaches while paying specific attention to individuals' interests and discipline alignments.

The benefits of SoTL

Main issue

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning impacts on staff and students, as well as on disciplines, departments, institutions, and global communities of practice. SoTL benefits include learning enhancements; support for pedagogical preparation; professional development; improved learning opportunities; and the development of global community-building centred on teaching and learning. Regardless of these benefits HEPs do not consistently articulate the benefits and value of SoTL nor effectively recognise it.

Illustration

Heads of Academic Development report that SoTL is beneficial because of the fresh insights it provides and the different kind of dialogue engagement it enables. Lecturers benefit from the pedagogical preparation, professional development and learning opportunities that SoTL-informed recruitment, promotion and award systems can provide. Students benefit in terms of better learning experience and outcomes. Disciplines are

enriched by scholarly improvements. Departments and institutions benefit from reflective and scholarly practitioners committed to teaching and learning enhancement.

Suggestions for strategically using SoTL to promote institutional learning and teaching enhancement included - clear definitions and shared institutional understanding of SoTL; embedding SoTL within the institutional structures the most appropriate for the HEP; clear signposting of the changes expected; working in partnership with students; gathering evidence; and measuring impacts.

Partnerships, communities of practice and networks (internal or external) also serve to empower individuals through the sharing of information and SoTL practice, and developing expertise. In providing a network of shared interests, transnational partnerships can promote change by drawing attention to different practices, as another respondent indicates:

... also looking nationally and internationally at what other people are doing, what might be considered best practice and what else we could be doing... It does change things...

Implication for policy and practice

There are potential benefits that might be derived from disciplinary, faculty, institutional and transnational practices as well as strengthened partnerships, collaborations, networks and communities of practice for enriching SoTL. Institutional policy must signal and champion the benefits of SoTL and leverage the lessons learned by gathering evidence, measuring impact, and valuing dissemination of SoTL findings.

Understandings of SoTL and UKPSF

Main issue

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning as enquiry on practice sits well with the United Kingdom Professional Standards Framework (UK PSF) as both share the broad purpose of assisting those seeking to enhance students' learning experiences through improvements in the quality of their teaching and learning support. However, SoTL is not always clearly understood, articulated or defined by higher education providers in the UK. Part of the challenge lies in its spectral descriptions and constituent multi-layered meanings when operationalised within diverse institutional cultures, values and contexts.

Illustration

SoTL promotes enquiry on practice that advances student outcomes. It involves reflective and scholarly evidence-based study of students' learning within a practitioner's course or programme that leads to innovations, changes or enhancements of practice. Commitments to peer-review, public dissemination and sharing within a global community of practice in order to build collective disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge and continued improvements are other aspects. Prevailing institutional norms shape and determine the extent to which the multi-faceted SoTL is signposted, articulated and rationalised, and what expectations need to be met to evidence quality or excellence, and by which categories of staff.

In supporting the continued professional development of staff engaged in teaching and learning, the UK PSF provides entry points for negotiating SoTL meanings and framing it within HEPs. Responding to the opportunity presented by SoTL for alignment with professional recognition, HEPs have applied the UK PSF to reflect upon, increase awareness of, and advance SoTL. This has taken the form of explicit institutional policies, strategies and guidelines, clearly articulated promotions criteria linking both, and new approaches to teaching and learning. By fostering the documentation of dynamic, creative and innovative approaches to teaching and learning through continuous development, UK PSF can support sharing of good SoTL practice. Impacts of these practices can demonstrate to students and other stakeholders the benefits that SoTL brings to student learning as well as professional development.

Implication for policy and practice

Policy attention to leveraging the symbiotic and mutually reinforcing goals of SoTL and the UK SPF for enhancing both student and staff professional development outcomes can potentially maximise understanding of both, and facilitate the much needed institutional cultural shift to recognise teaching quality and excellence.

Defining and supporting SoTL

The HEA 'Defining and Supporting SoTL' project (RT05) was a collaborative project involving the contribution of four main UK partners – the University of West London, the University of Brighton, the University of Bristol, and Keele University and a number of other national and international contributors.

To cite these case studies

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