

Book review

The scholarship of teaching and learning in and across the disciplines

McKinney, K. (Ed., 2013). Indiana University Press.

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The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) emerged as a new discipline in the last few decades with a focus on integrating research, practice, and theory of teaching and learning (Harland, Hussain, & Bakar, 2014; Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011; Perry & Smart, 2007; Rowena, 2008). Although teaching and learning in higher education have been identified as scholarly activities supported by research, theory and practice, there are still foundational questions. How does SoTL integrate research, theory, and practice in teaching-learning in higher education? How do theory and research inform practice in classroom teaching and vice-versa? What are the specifics of SoTL research as a discipline? How does SoTL guide research in teaching and learning? How does teaching-learning contribute to SoTL research? Is there any teaching-learning commons? What is the epistemology and philosophy of SoTL? These are some foundational questions underlying current trends and debates in SoTL research and practice. In this context, this book (*The Scholarship of teaching and learning in and across the disciplines*) edited by Kathleen McKinney highlights the issues of power and privilege, psychological and pedagogical balance, expert and novice practices, epistemology and praxeology of teaching-learning in higher education, vantage points of research in teaching and learning, and transforming SoTL through a multidisciplinary approach to inquiry into teaching and learning. This review focuses on key issues of SoTL – issues of integration of theory and practice – to discuss how the authors of 13 seminal chapters integrated principles of SoTL balancing theory, method, and practice within and across a range of disciplines.

The development of SoTL can be viewed from two perspectives: SoTL as a paradigm or as a discipline. The current focus is on the second one. With this view, the first chapter (by Nancy L. Chick) explains key aspects of humanities SoTL that acknowledges and values the difference among disciplines within an inclusive atmosphere of multiple views, practices, and theories. The contributor to this chapter suggests a broader understanding of teaching and learning process in higher education despite the differences in “backgrounds, strengths, and worldviews” (p. 19). The varieties of SoTLs, such as literary SoTL, language SoTL, and humanities SoTL, may have common problems and issues that can be helpful to understand the rhetoric, cognitive, and emotional challenges of the general SoTL. However, the issue of disciplinary privilege to certain methods may weaken the interdisciplinary power, and there is also a possibility that interdisciplinarity of SoTL may be trapped within the pitfalls of borrowed theories and methods when it does not have its own. Any teaching and learning process involves human mind and actions. These actions are affected by one’s emotions, attitudes, and values. In this context, chapter 2 (by Regan A. R. Gurung & Beth M. Schwartz) focuses on psychological foundations of SoTL and classroom applications of the interdisciplinary approach to teaching, learning, and research. The psychology of learning and teaching any discipline has been greatly influenced by the transitions of behaviorism, cognitivism, and

constructivism to psycho-social learning theories. At the same time, the field of psychology (through teaching and learning of psychology) has been influenced by the developments of SoTL as a discipline. That means there is an ongoing transaction between SoTL and cognitive and other fields of psychology. Authors of the chapters in this book draw upon theories of social psychology that can be applied to SoTL. At the same time, there is a lack of clarity about how these theories contribute to SoTL research although they are dominant to teaching and learning.

There are many challenges in SoTL process. Some of them are related to the ability of students to learn basic principles, psychological bottlenecks in learning, and social phenomena. Chapter 3 (by Curtis Bennett & Jacqueline Dewar) outlines shortcomings in the process of students' understanding of mathematical proofs and a SoTL approach to investigate the problems and issues related to mathematical proofs and proving in higher education. The contributors to this chapter observe the issue from knowledge and expertise dimensions of cognitive, affective, and psychosocial development while learning and teaching mathematical proofs. Besides the detail of the evolution of understanding proofs and what promoted the understanding, the readers might be interested in learning about what kind of teaching has promoted student understanding of proofs, rather than descriptions of students' responses in generating proofs and their understanding of proofs. Instead of mentioning this course or that, it would be better to explore the processes in those courses that might have helped them construct and understand the proofs than just to explain student responses on proofs and proving. Chapter 4 (by Jeffrey L. Bernstein) ploughs through the bottlenecks in political science teaching and learning by relating the issues to two communities of practice: experts versus novices. This chapter unpacks the process of doing political science as novices and experts and highlights two aspects that create a bottleneck: understanding the conflictual nature of politics and the majority-minority divide. Chapter 5 (by Leah Shopkow et al.) diagnoses a "History Learning Project" as a context for "Decoding the Disciplines" in an approach to integrate teaching and epistemology. This chapter outlines seven steps of "Decoding the Discipline": method and process of identifying problems; methods to overcome the problems; modeling the operations; applying the model in teaching; involving students in the process; assessing the process; and disseminating the outcomes. These key processes are equally valuable and applicable to SoTL in other fields.

The discipline of SoTL is and should be inclusive of all educational processes in higher education. It is not separate from the processes of curriculum development and assessment as they are integral parts of teaching and learning and also research. However, these aspects are heavily dominated by social, psychological, and historical perspectives in SoTL. It seems that there is a little role for theories of education in SoTL. For example, chapter 6 (by Caroline Hodges Persell & Antonio E. Mateiro) explores the strategies to teach four key understandings in sociology and assessment of those strategies. These four key understandings are: social behavior, scientific method of sociology, social inequality, and construction of ideas such as race and gender. Chapter 7 (by Gary Poole) sheds light on the issues of multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, transdisciplinarity, and underlying beliefs that might influence the collaborative efforts of SoTL. The challenges include a variety of beliefs about the nature of research across the disciplines, as well as of beliefs about the nature of knowledge and knowing. Chapter 8 (by Liz Grauerholz & Eric Main) contests the idea of experimental design research in SoTL due to the fallacy of true control groups in classroom settings when "no two classes are alike" (p. 155). Another fallacy, the author reports, concerns the generalizability of research results: outcomes of SoTL research in one institutional setting may not be generalizable to others. Another issue is related to the assessment approach – some focusing more on quantitative assessment and others focusing on qualitative or mixed approach to assessment and their effect on students' learning.

The notion of SoTL interdisciplinary research and teaching-learning involves collaboration among scholars (both students and teachers). This collaboration may generate new methods and approaches to doing SoTL amid challenges. In this context, chapter 9 (by David A. Reichard & Kathy Takayama) compares two approaches to exploring student learning – the humanist approach and the scientific approach – and how these cross-disciplinary approaches contribute to each other through collaboration. Chapter 10 (by Jennifer Meta Robinson et al.) presents SoTL practice through a graduate seminar on ‘inquiry in teaching and learning’. This chapter points to the subtleties of the interdisciplinary graduate seminar as a SoTL practice where the graduate students and their advisors from four different departments create a model of a learning community. Forming a common language across the disciplines, creating smooth transitions across the disciplines, understanding the differences, and developing a sense of respect and value across the disciplines are the key aspects of SoTL practice throughout the seminar. However, there are issues of specificity and generality of SoTL research findings. Chapter 11 (by Lauren Scharff) discusses the two key ideas ‘context specificity’ and ‘generalizability’ as part of the big picture of SoTL research and practice. The author portrays the image of SoTL as either departmental or inter-departmental, and as a means of collaboration and inspiration for a broader understanding of different fields. The next chapter (12, by Cheryl Albers) projects the challenges and promises of SoTL as a discipline. The major challenge is integrating SoTL efforts into the institutional strategic plans with specific mission, vision, and goal. This means the challenge is to instill ‘a sense of importance’ of SoTL as a discipline of research, theory and practice to transform educational values, norms, and practices in universities and higher education institutions. Other challenges include the diversity of methods of doing SoTL across the disciplines, which may create problems of analysis and interpretation of information – local versus global analysis and qualitative versus quantitative analysis. The last chapter (13, by Carmen Werder) concludes the survey of SoTL theory and practice in and across the disciplines by highlighting the importance of multidisciplinary, interdisciplinarity, and possibly transdisciplinarity. The notions of multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinary approaches do not mean that disciplinary approaches to SoTL should be abandoned, but can strengthen SoTL through co-existence, collaboration, co-authorship, and co-leadership within and across the departments and fields of studies.

The book is worth reading though it may not be an easy one for a novice SoTL reader and practitioner. The authors of all the chapters bring forth a variety of ideas concerning theories, methods and practices of SoTL in higher education, especially issues of interdisciplinary SoTL.

References

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