

Getting started With SoTL In Your Classroom

Raymond Francis
Central Michigan University
Mt. Pleasant, Michigan, USA
raymond.w.francis@cmich.edu

Abstract

The synthesis of the principles of SoTL into a process to be used in the classroom is an important part of scholarship. This work reviews foundation information related to SoTL and combines ideas from multiple authors into a manageable vision. In addition, the author identifies a tentative seven-step process for use in an individual classroom, and shares a classroom example of the use of SoTL to improve an individual's practice. The specific classroom example is used to demonstrate both the process of SoTL and reinforce the foundation and expectations of SoTL in the professional community.

Introduction

I must admit that for years I have thought of myself as an effective teacher in my college classroom. I stayed current with my own professional practice by reading journals, conducted research, had good student satisfaction results, and attended conferences. I updated my course materials on a regular basis. And, I even sought out input from my students "from time to time" about topics of interest. In short, I was doing all of the things I thought I should be doing to deliver an effective course to my students, and balance my research interests. Life was, at least from my perspective, quite good.

Then it happened. I read an on-line work titled "The Scholarship of Teaching" (Bender & Grey, 1999, at <http://www.indiana.edu/~rcapub/v22n1/p03.html>) and it really started me thinking. According to Bender & Grey, the scholarship of teaching and learning means "that we invest in our teaching the intellectual powers we practice in our research." That single quote changed how I approached teaching my classes. It set off an exploration and research project that impacted my students, my professional practice, and my research agenda. With that in mind, I would like to share some ideas for getting started in exploring the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) in your own classroom, and an example from my own classroom.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning For Novices

There are many articles, books, and websites devoted to SoTL. However, the resource used in framing this particular work came from a SoTL tutorial at <http://www.issotl.org/tutorial/sotltutorial/home.html>. The tutorial lists several aspects of SoTL that must be met in order to be a "scholarly" endeavour. These aspects include that the your work "becomes scholarship when it possesses at least

three attributes: it becomes public, it becomes an object of critical review and evaluation by members of one's community, and members of one's community begin to use, build upon, and develop those acts of mind and creation."

This quote has several meanings. First, it means that your efforts should be public in some manner. This can be with your peers or colleagues, or with your students, or both. The public aspect indicates that you are actively participating in a sincere effort, much like research, to inform your practice and the practice of your professional community.

Second, your efforts are reviewed critically. This can take place through publication or posting of reports on the internet. It can take place through the sharing of documents and results with individuals such as mentors or members of professional organizations at conferences.

Lastly, the results are used in making informed decisions about changes to courses, practice, or programs. The scholarship must be applied to inform and improve practice.

The basic elements of SoTL for a novice are simple. The following list is synthesized from a number of sources and authors. The process evolved from authors as Boyer (1990), Thompson (2001), Hutchings (2002), Becker & Andrews (2004), as well as many others. SoTL efforts are similar in many respects to research projects, and yet there are many subtle differences. The steps I have used in my own practice include:

- 1) identify the question, or describe what it is to be learned,
- 2) develop a plan to gather data,
- 3) gather and analyze data,
- 4) describe your results and generate a context for your results,
- 5) state your conclusions,
- 6) share your results with peers (make your results public with an audience),
- 7) make decisions about future actions related to your question.

My Classroom Narrative

In order to give these steps a context, I share with you the following example from my own classroom. As a part of my professional assignment I teach, and coordinate, a capstone seminar for 54 student teachers. Although the student survey results are very positive, I had become concerned about their understanding and application of effective classroom management strategies. The question I decided to focus on was "do the students grow in their knowledge base of classroom management that is sufficient to allow them to be successful in the classroom (Step 1)?"

In order to gather data appropriate for my research question, I decided to make use of existing assignments to gather the data needed to answer the question (Step 2). This data gathering process included the comparison of concept maps developed by students during their initial seminar and their final seminar. The students constructed their concept maps in response to a prompt about their own knowledge and use of classroom management strategies. The concept maps were examined for the number of responses for each level of the concept map, as well as the classification of terms used that related to the stated objectives about classroom management (Step 3).

The results were analyzed using a spreadsheet to explore the frequency and types of entries made by the students (Step 4). A summary of the results for my class included an overall growth of 280% from the pre- and post-student teaching concept maps. This growth was close to the expected (Francis, 2006) based on the idea that classroom management was a familiar concept to the student teachers. The students connected with the stated objectives at a rate of 86% in the inner levels of the concept map, and demonstrated application-based strategies in their maps at a similar rate. Basically, the student teachers were demonstrating a good level of growth and the ability to apply strategies in their classrooms.

Steps 5, 6, and 7 are currently "under construction" for the next semester. I am wrestling with the data and developing the context that is essential for scholarly understandings (Step 5). In addition, several colleagues and I have meetings scheduled to discuss my data and conclusions, as well as their conclusions about their own SoTL projects (Step 6). I would also add that I have submitted my data as a proposal for a regional and a national conference (SoTL Commons, 2007) where I intend to discuss and refine my conclusions (more of Step 6). Lastly, during the fall semester I plan to step back and reflect on the entire process, not only the question I am answering, but the process as well. I am sure I will be making changes to my class, and will be confident in the changes I make as a result of the SoTL process (Step 7).

Conclusion

I believe it is important for us to share our efforts in various stages of completion. It is only through this sharing that we can inform one another's performance and bring the idea of scholarship fully into play in our classrooms. Although not yet complete, my efforts at demonstrating scholarship appear in alignment with the research and models currently available. I am looking forward to my preliminary results, and the continuation of the investigation in upcoming semesters. I am not done yet. And much like me, my scholarship is still a work in progress.

References

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