

Changing Trains: The Story of SOTL in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union

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This essay is a brief story of SOTL in Eastern Europe as developed by the Curriculum Resource Center at Central European University (CEU) in its selected outreach programs over the past four years (see also, Renc-Roe, 2005). In accounting for the first steps towards SOTL, I would like to point out some general and context-specific problems that remain to be further studied. The story below is not so much a coherent narrative of all relevant developments, but is meant to be a discussion of the central points of tension and struggle for our own work in introducing SOTL, supported by some selected voices from our participants. Central to SOTL is one particular basic point of struggle; put simply, the tension between teaching and learning, and between a corresponding primary focus on reflection versus research (or scholarly teaching versus scholarship of teaching). But this tension has particular and specific meaning in this context and it is reflected well in our own institutional attempts to develop SOTL programs.

The Setting of the Story

The Curriculum Resource Center (CRC) is CEU's outreach department in higher education development, concentrating mostly on post-communist countries, but also on selected developing countries outside of this region. CRC's mission statement includes a notion of 'a scholar in the classroom', and in that phrase our adaptation of SOTL in the east European context is clearly marked. In all our outreach and professional development programs, to which teachers in social sciences and humanities from our target countries may apply, we work towards helping to develop scholars' capacities to teach innovatively and to reform their own university context and content of teaching. A scholarly approach to teaching seems a meaningful next step in reforming the university curriculum and teaching, but whether it is achievable remains to be seen. For sure, SOTL needs to fit in with much broader reform agendas that dictate what is possible and where.

The Pioneer SOTL Scholars in Eastern Europe

Although it is a generalization that excludes some institutions that are focused on student learning, for the most part the systems of education our scholars come from in Eastern Europe are characterised by a focus on teaching rather than learning, or on teaching input rather than student outcomes. Top-down prescription of standard teaching approaches is also common, from the proportion of lectures and seminars in a course, to content of programs and syllabi, to a widespread reliance on in-class learning (or rather in-class teaching) rather than independent learning, final assessment rather than continuous one, oral exams rather than written essays, etc. In short, in these systems, the 'instruction paradigm' (Barr and Tagg, 1995) in higher education is alive and well, or only beginning to be challenged in selected locations (more often than not through the individual agency of a lecturer).

The differences are much wider than just the approach to teaching: the normal entry and progress through the profession is different in the 'West', as are knowledge production and publication practices. The most significant difference is in the access to resources and the quality of the work context. Academics in Eastern Europe often do not have access to databases or good libraries, conference funding or significant research time. They tend to teach at several universities for inadequate pay and handle significant teaching loads each week.

The participants of our various programs, who are likely SOTL scholars of the first generation, are highly internationalized and innovative academics teaching in all sorts of higher education institutions: regional and capital-city, state owned and private, well established and new, innovative and conservative. What connects them is their international orientation in their own fields and their interest in professional development, teaching and learning, and often in the wider reform processes in higher education.

The First Journey: Course Portfolio Pilot Program

The story of SOTL based-programs at CRC started in 2003 when I was presented Pat Hutchings' (1998) book on course portfolios by my dean who asked if I wanted 'to do something' with this idea. I read it cover to cover and immediately decided that it was the single most interesting concept in higher education practice I had come across. I soon discovered that there is a whole institutional SOTL context in the U.S., mainly around the Carnegie Foundation, and that it is becoming a more or less institutionalized, though still rather innovative, trend in higher education.

Soon we were ready to try the approach ourselves and, not surprisingly, given our first inspiration, the course portfolio idea emerged as the most meaningful way to proceed. We decided not to start any separate program but instead to find our feet by introducing course portfolios as an optional element in our course design competition program, which gathers about thirty academics per year. In this way, the Pilot Course Portfolio Project started. This integration into another program proved a blessing and a curse: on the one hand, we had enormous freedom to experiment and learn, but, on the other, we also had little time with the participants during their short stays with us in Budapest since the other elements of the program had to take priority.

We gathered a small group of enthusiasts among the program participants, discussed the idea in special workshops, set up a grant extension for the portfolio production, and finally, two years later, our very first writing residency took place. By that stage I had managed to visit the Carnegie foundation in 2005, where Richard Gale agreed to help with designing and facilitating our writing residencies.

The ideas of SOTL seemed to resonate strongly with our first participants, and they were more than enthusiastic to try the approach as demonstrated by one portfolio writer:

Course portfolios will generate data and knowledge that would be open for critical review and available for use by other members of the academic community.... It would contribute to fill the gap and blur the boundaries in academia between teaching and research. Moreover, it would introduce the

"the scholarship of teaching" in my department. It could even also involve students in faculty research. It would bring the new vision on the scholarship of teaching and it could convince the staff that learning in the classroom is a collaborative job. It could stimulate other university teachers to do research on their own practices in courses they teach.

... This new concept could challenge the professors to rethink the academic boundaries and obstacles in our university departments (Stefan Detchev's, Course Portfolio, 2005)

The portfolios were an invaluable source of knowledge on what was happening at universities and in the classrooms. And, thinking that they will naturally provide a good beginning for a paper that can be written as an extension of the portfolio, we left the focus of the research quite open, which duly allowed any number of interests to emerge. Though the academics did employ evaluation tools they designed themselves or organized interviews with their students, the focus on student learning was often not achieved in their portfolios, or essays written on the basis of their portfolios, or, if present, this aspect of the process was not supported with adequate evidence. Also the understanding of SOTL as an actual *research* project was not at all clearly taken up. This difficulty was made particularly memorable when, in our very first writing residency organized for the first two generations' of portfolio authors, a sociologist, who had already carried out two student focus groups with the graduates of his course and had had some interesting results, exclaimed sometime around the latter part of the week: "you mean you want us to do research into our teaching!?"

Most of the papers finally produced by our first portfolio participants are reflective papers on teaching. They engage in teaching in new and meaningful ways, they create language and a commitment to teaching that is desperately needed in our region. They are self-critical and informative, but they are probably not typical SOTL research articles. They are definitely evidence of scholarly teaching. We know some of the participants are publishing this work in English, so there is clearly a lot to be proud of (e.g. Detchev, 2007; Maldini, 2007).

We have persisted in trying to stimulate the writing of course portfolios over the following years, and have finally integrated the portfolio element into the program that hosted it. We have again gathered some of the course portfolio participants to take part in our second writing residency, together with our new SOTL fellows. One of the participants of the last writing residency, and an author of a portfolio-based paper, summed up the process of change well: she had thought she was going on one trip only to be told that she should change trains and go on another, longer trip to a new destination. To refer back to Lee Shulman's regionally relevant metaphor of the beginnings of SOTL (Shulman, 2000), it was a story of going from Minsk to Pinsk by a horse that was willing to take us only half way. For some reasons, the journey proved more difficult and demanded more time than we had available.

Changing Trains: A New SOTL Fellowship Program

Having both discovered the benefits and encountered the difficulties of starting with reflexive writing in this pilot project, we have started the first SOTL Fellowship as a new program in summer 2007 with a call for proposals for research projects on teaching and learning.

We received an incredible amount of applications (well over a hundred), though some were outside the scope of the program and many were not research proposals at all. In most cases, the introduction of a new method into teaching was the intended aim. However, some alumni of the course portfolio program submitted some of the most interesting proposals, and one of them became a SOTL Fellow (amongst four selected projects). Clearly then, there is, for some of their participants at least, a developmental journey behind the two programs. And, given time and individual commitment, the switch from reflection on teaching to research on student learning duly occurred.

The current SOTL Fellowship is based around two writing residencies at the beginning and the end of the year. The first of those took place last September, again with invaluable help from Richard Gale as our SOTL advisor and facilitator.

Our first small group of scholars in this "one year research and collaboration program" currently consists of three historians and two lawyers from three countries. We have a collaborative inquiry into case-based teaching in European Internal Market Law in a university context that is very much based on a classical continental approach to legal education (case studies are not used at all in most courses). The group's task is to document how their innovation is necessary for their students' learning of content and helpful in developing student problem solving skills. Two historians from the same department in a regional Russian university have developed projects dealing with usual visual methods in teaching word history (Barlova, 2008) and investigating student resistance to gender content of history courses (Novikova, 2008), while a Ukrainian historian has investigated ways of making student learning visible in a course on nationalism employing research-based learning (Kasianov, 2008).

Encouragingly, from day one of their residency our five scholars clearly picked up on the central SOTL idea. This was made noted by one of the fellows starting his first project proposal re-write (on day two):

*The project is not about teaching nationalism. The project is not about teaching. **It is all about learning**, this was not clear to me when I applied for SoTL. The focus of the project should be shifted from subject-centered approach to the student-centered one.*

Having picked it up, they went to work on their projects' designs enthusiastically and established a learning community atmosphere. The course portfolio authors also benefited from participating in the collaborative process and have been "shifted," in the words of the above participant, to a focus on students. As one participant commented in the wrap up discussion at the end of the residency:

I was protesting that I don't want to write about my students learning, I wanted to write about my teaching which is more obvious for me and which is what I know for sure but now I don't think so. It is interesting to write about your students' learning and it is important because you do it [teaching] for them.

One of the new SOTL fellows categorized the progress of the group in the residency in quite dramatic terms:

We have this proverb [in Russian] that a good movement forward needs a very good kick from the back... We can say we have received a sort of positive push to our backs and hopefully we will move forward.

Destination: Becoming a SOTL Scholar

The rest of the development of SOTL in our region is still history in the making as first drafts of research papers are being written right now. And new problems are bound to emerge when the work of each scholar nears completion. The current fellows face as many, if not more, challenges on the individual and institutional levels as any faculty entering SOTL. Writing papers in English in this new

interdisciplinary field and presenting their work internationally is not easy and requires additional resources which are not always readily available.

However, the greatest challenge for our participants will not be to complete their papers or to present and publish them, but rather to begin to influence their local disciplinary contexts in order for the ideas and ideals of their work to reach a wider audience in their own profession. So far, the region as a whole is not yet ready for SOTL. Our Ukrainian colleague characterised the typical reaction to such an innovation in the mid-year update on progress:

In December 2007 I presented the project idea and logistics to the department. The head of department is quite enthusiastic. Two faculty members also. The rest are just shrugging.

So far, the reality we face is that SOTL can enter the region only through the commitment of individual academics. It may reach their departments and faculties and their national or regional disciplinary networks.

But many problems remain to be further studied. Is SOTL resonating with faculty because of their primary interest in teaching rather than student learning? Can we switch this focus more successfully in the future and connect our scholars with their colleagues in other countries and the SOTL community? The tension between teaching and learning should remain with us as a valuable understanding of change which could be explored further in research and in our practice. It is clear that SOTL scholars start their journey by thinking about *teaching*, about themselves and their educational contexts. This interest is necessary as, in some way, teachers are the key learners in SOTL, and the first steps towards research on student learning are always taken by teachers starting to be more passionate and concerned, more reflexive and more puzzled by their own teaching.

As the proponents of the learning paradigm (Barr and Tagg, 1995) would put it, the purpose of teaching is to help students learn by whatever means possible. But in order to do this we need also to know how we can help teachers teach, experiment, innovate, reflect and redesign their courses with an awareness of student learning gained in the process. This is the key preoccupation of many teachers in Eastern Europe because they need to develop effective teaching practices as a matter of primary concern and as part of larger reform processes in higher education that are far from complete. The understanding of the importance of student learning is obviously another step, but impossible without the first one. After all, as Shulman and Hutchings (1999) have stated, SOTL is meant to help us advance the profession of teaching in the disciplines.

Therefore, three possibilities for SOTL scholars of our own broadly defined region and elsewhere are clear: to provide evidence and understanding of student

learning, to integrate and extend relevant literature to help reframe current focus on teaching as a focus on student learning (and its context, including teaching), or to provide a commentary on observed critical classroom issues supported by research evidence that may help broader reform agendas that will make future SOTL work possible.

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