The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: A Canadian Perspective

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This article provides a brief overview of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and how the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) is working to strengthen its presence in Canada.

The *scholarship of teaching and learning* (SoTL) has become an important international movement in higher education. The roots began in the United States when Ernest Boyer who advocated the explicit recognition of four types of scholarship: discovery, integration, application, and teaching. Today, the scholarship of teaching and learning can be broadly defined as a type of scholarship in which faculty study the impact of their own teaching practice on student learning, respond to the results, and disseminate their findings. Its proponents, such as Maryellen Weimer, Editor of the *Teaching Professor*, have suggested that scholarly work on teaching and learning holds much promise for improving the quality of teaching and learning in higher education, grounding instructional practice in a knowledge base, professionalizing the field, and valuing and rewarding college and university teaching[1]. Lee Shulman, President of the Carnegie Foundation, has further argued that the SoTL is imperative to the integrity of academe:

> We can hardly be a moral community with mission statements that talk about the central place of teaching and learning if we are not also places that investigate those processes and place them at the center of the scholarship in which we properly take such pride.[2]

The SoTL movement has recently captured much interest amongst Canadian academics, educational/instructional developers, and most notably - the STLHE. This interest was underscored two years ago when the Society adopted *Advancing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* as one of its four strategic directions. This portfolio is currently held by Lynn Taylor of Dalhousie University, one of few Canadian experts in the field.

Interest was further in evidence last spring when over 100 university and college administrators attended Canada's first "National Symposium on the SoTL", co-hosted by STLHE and Centre for Higher Education Research and Development (CHERD) at the University of Toronto. Richard Gale, Director of the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) helped attendees explore what the SoTL is, why it is important, and what administrators can do to support it in their own institutions.

In October 2005, Canada hosted the 2nd Annual International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSoTL) Conference in Vancouver. Co-sponsored by the University of British Columbia and Malaspina University College, this sold-out conference attracted approximately 700 delegates, including almost 200 Canadians, who came together to share the results of their research on their teaching practice. At this conference I was asked to represent Canada on an international panel that discussed various national initiatives in support of the SoTL. As I listened to my colleagues describe the initiatives that were underway in their own countries, I was struck by the "grass roots" nature of the movement in Canada. In Canada there have been no multi-million dollar SoTL programs, foundations, centres of excellence, or granting councils established for supporting this important work. We also have no government mandated requirements for preparing PhD students or new faculty for their teaching roles or ensuring some minimal level of exposure to the pedagogical literature.

This vacuum is likely due in part to the division of responsibilities between our Federal and Provincial governments. The Canadian Federal Government is largely responsible for funding research in higher education, through such programs as the National Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), and the Canada Research

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[1] Weimer, Mary Ellen, Pedagogical Scholarship: A Primer on Previously Published Work. Workshop handout, presented at the University of Guelph, November 2005.

[2] Shulman, Lee, Visions of the Possible, www.carnegiefoundation.org/elibrary/docs/Visions.htm

Chairs (CRC) program. The Provinces, in contrast, are largely responsible for the base funding of all levels of the education system, as well as for ensuring the appropriateness and quality of all university and college programs. As the SoTL is common to both of these mandates, it has the potential to serve as an important bridging mechanism. Unfortunately, it seems to have largely *fallen between the cracks*, victim of a system which often unwittingly positions research, teaching and learning as competing rather than complementary activities.

Despite this lack of formal government funding, much activity is occurring across the country in support of the SoTL. For example:

- Most universities and many colleges now have teaching development centres, where faculty interested in this type of scholarship can receive support.
- Over the past decade many institutions have declared their commitment to various "signature pedagogies" (e.g., co-op education, inquiry based-learning, learner-centredness). More recently there has been interest in studying the effect of these approaches on student learning.
- Program committees have sought support in assessing both current and reformed curricula, in order to identify needed changes and evaluate whether intended changes in student learning have actually occurred.
- Changes have been made to promotion and tenure policies, in order to explicitly acknowledge and value the SoTL.
- Faculty recruits have been asked to submit teaching dossiers (including teaching philosophy statements) and to discuss their teaching scholarship as part of the hiring process.
- Tenure track "teaching faculty" positions have been created, in which faculty are explicitly expected to conduct, and provide disciplinary-based leadership in, the SoTL.
- Institutes for the SoTL have been founded on several campuses, which pursue research funds and provide guidance to faculty who are new to this form of scholarship.
- Several institutions have either established private Teaching Chairs or have sought to fill CRC positions with people expert in the SoTL.
- Offices of Research have teamed up with Educational Development Centres to highlight (i.e., in newsletters and workshops) the teaching and learning scholarship engaging faculty.
- At least one Canadian graduate program now requires its PhD students to take a course on pedagogical theory and practice.
- The Educational Developers Caucus (EDC) of STLHE dedicated its winter conference (February 2006) to exploring the role of educational developers in promoting and supporting the SoTL.
- Several campuses have focused their annual educational conferences on the SoTL.
- National teaching awards coordinated by STLHE, such as the 3M Teaching Fellowships and the Alan Blizzard Award, require evidence of the scholarship of teaching and learning.
- Informally, members of the Federal government have been very supportive of the Society's efforts to raise awareness about the importance of the SoTL at the national level.

Taken together, these initiatives demonstrate that there is a lot of interest across the country in the SoTL. However, many of these activities exist in isolated pockets, at the margins of faculty work, lack coordination and, most importantly, meaningful financial support. The question that we now face as a Society is how to build on these efforts to create a truly national movement?

Following the National Symposium in April of 2005, and with the support of representatives from Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) and SSHRC, the Society embarked on a project to build a national framework for supporting the SoTL in Canada, in partnership with other national organizations. The beginnings of this framework were presented to an international audience in Vancouver in October, 2005, in advance of the ISSoTL conference. Many excellent suggestions were formulated in a document we plan to complete in the months ahead. For a copy of the draft framework please see www.mcmaster.ca/stlhe/documents/SoTL.strategy.paper.pdf

I had the opportunity to speak about the SoTL and the Society's framework at the National Dialogue on Higher Education, a conference held in Ottawa this past November. The Dialogue, organized by the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, put the spotlight on issues of importance to

higher education. Presentations primarily dealt with financial issues such as the need for more research funding and reductions in tuition levels. In contrast, my presentation focused on the need to enhance the quality of the higher education system. I argued that significantly more support was needed for teaching and learning and suggested that the SoTL was one mechanism through which this might occur. Specifically, I called for enhanced federal/provincial cooperation; a new form of partnership in support of an integrated vision and strategy for higher education—one that would treat research, teaching and learning as mutually reinforcing activities. Such a vision would include:

- A strategy for supporting innovative curricular reform.
- A strategy for supporting the training and development of the future professoriate.
- A strategy for supporting the SoTL.

I also suggested that, regardless of whether or not enhanced federal and provincial cooperation occurs, supporting the SoTL was well within the current mandate of the Federal Government. Specifically, I advocated for:

- The development of a national research agenda for the SoTL in the disciplines, including the study of signature pedagogies (e.g., labs in the sciences, seminars in the humanities, case studies in management, and clinical rounds and problem-based learning in medicine).
- The identification of sources of funds, such as extending NSERC and SSHRC funding, to explicitly include the SoTL.
- Extending the Canada Research Chairs program to explicitly include the SoTL (e.g., one Chair for every interested university across the country).
- The identification of innovative program structures to include dissemination and uptake (e.g., research clusters, centres of excellence).
- Incentives to ensure that participating institutions adequately addressed local barriers, such as promotion and tenure processes. Conditions could include, for example, that participating institutions provide evidence that they have created local environments in which this work will be supported and valued.

Responses to my presentation were very positive and we are now in the process of discussing possible follow-up events with HRSDC. This is important work for the Society and we are excited by the progress we have made to date.