

**Reflective, Reflexive, and Recursive: the Praxis of SoTL**

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**Abstract**

SoTL is a theoretical orientation with practical application, which, in its time, yields fruit. However, inquiry into teaching and learning and getting to the point where such inquiry is peer reviewed and made public through traditional routes is often a complex undertaking. As such, a look at the process-oriented nature of SoTL is warranted. SoTL is reflective, reflexive, and recursive, and sometimes the only thing gained is coquina for the next time around. SoTL is laden with theoretical, practical, moral, and social imperatives, and must be continued despite challenges.

## **Background**

With the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) as catalyst, the last decade has witnessed a tremendous growth in scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Currently, SoTL is gaining new momentum on college campuses in the United States (Henderson & Buchanan, 2007), as well as internationally. Huber and Hutchings have argued that SoTL is an imperative rather than a choice for institutions of higher learning (2005, p. 13). SoTL is manifested differently across and within various disciplines. However, it is the contexts of SoTL that set it apart from general research on teaching and learning, with regards both to the clarity and depth of understanding that it brings to individual situations and the challenge it poses in connecting SoTL across paradigms (Huber and Hutchings, 2005). Regardless of the immediate contexts and shades of definition of SoTL (McKinney, 2007), there seems to be some consensus among leaders in the field that work within SoTL can be identified by four main characteristics. First, teaching is viewed as inquiry into student learning (Huber and Morreale, 2002). Second, it views teaching as public and community oriented, rather than private and idiosyncratic (Huber and Hutchings, 2005). Third, the work should be subject to review and evaluation. Last, it should be accessible to others in one's field (Bass, 1999). These characteristics notwithstanding, SoTL can be difficult to ascertain in the product driven academy. In my opinion, SoTL is a mindset, an attitude, a world view, that in its time bears fruit that can be judged against numerous criteria. As such, a look at the process-oriented nature of SoTL is warranted.

## **The Nature of SoTL**

SoTL is rooted in reflection and action and it ultimately generates products. Nonetheless, the pure work of SoTL is in the process. In fact, the work of SoTL is never done. By nature it is reflective, reflexive, and recursive. Thus, SoTL has its very own three Rs, which can aid in understanding its nature. SoTL is a never ending process in which sometimes the only thing

gained is insight or *coquina* for the next time around. Perhaps Aristotle would have approved of SoTL for bringing together *theoria*, *poiesis*, and *praxis* with emphasis on enactment supported by theory and production. That is, SoTL emphasizes praxis. "Praxis involves critical reflection and contemplation on one's actions and using the reflection to inform practice" (hooks, 1994 and Freire, 1970/1998). It is not surprising, given such an ambitious agenda, that work done in the spirit of SoTL (a) requires much consideration and contemplation (Shulman, 2001), (b) is directed back on itself with ethical and moral imperatives (Atkinson, 2001), and (c) often comes full circle, ready to *re-currere*. At once its greatest strength and challenge, contexts, sometimes shifting contexts, produce some inherent threats for SoTL.

SoTL, then, is no fast ticket to scholarly success, but rather a time-honored engagement by those who seek to improve teaching and learning in their own and other contexts. The momentum of SoTL must not be misinterpreted to mean that activities of low quality or lacking in integrity will be allowed to masquerade as SoTL. Nor is SoTL just a quick action research project. It is good that discussions are being held about how to identify and evaluate SoTL. CASTL SoTL Cluster Members in the summer of 2005 came up with four standards and corresponding descriptors that could be used in evaluating SoTL.

The four standards are: 1. SoTL exhibits methodological rigor, 2. SoTL has substantive implications/outcomes, 3. SoTL is peer reviewed, and 4. SoTL is made public (McKinney, 2007, p. 98). When I look at the standards put forth by CASTL SoTL Cluster Members for use in evaluating SoTL, I see standards that are used to evaluate the products of other scholarly works. Rather than taking this discussion to mean lower standards, the opposite should be assumed. Work done in the name of SoTL, although manifested differently from works done in other areas, will need to meet comparable standards if SoTL is to be taken seriously. Many of the people who are engaged in SoTL have been doing it for many years. For some, the momentum has provided new labels and niches for what they are doing. Meanwhile a new generation of scholars also has a framework through which to connect their teaching and

scholarship in a manner that, thanks in part to SoTL, will be valued and rewarded within the academy.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

New insights are gleaned when one engages in SoTL and in time such engagement yields very useful and context specific information, which taken together, advances understanding of teaching and learning within and across disciplines. I believe that it is a particular view of teaching and learning that enables those who investigate teaching and learning to engage in praxis, as opposed to prematurely abandoning such work as fruitless and instead pursuing work with more readily “publishable material.” It takes a particular understanding of the reflective, recursive, and reflexive nature of SoTL to maintain momentum even when products are not immediately tangible and getting them perhaps means starting over. Given the process- oriented nature of SoTL, it is incumbent upon the SoTL community to devise ways to recognize not only the products, but also the processes of SoTL. This will be most beneficial for those new to SoTL, as their products might not be readily available in traditional venues as they begin to inquire into teaching and learning. In the meantime, ideas abound for documenting SoTL (McKinney, 2007, Huber and Hutchings, 2005), and documentation is always a good starting point. Those who engage in such work know that the work is laden with theoretical and practical, as well as moral and social imperatives, and must be continued despite challenges.

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