

Integrating SOTL into Instructional and Institutional Processes

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Abstract

The benefits of SOTL for individual faculty members are significant. Unfortunately, the issue of how it can benefit an institution is often not so clear. For SOTL to be valued and supported by postsecondary institutions, it needs to be purposely linked into the research and teaching mission of the institution. This paper shares successful approaches for integrating SOTL in instructional and institutional processes. SOTL's focus on supporting and refining scholarly inquiry can broaden the scope for improving student learning outcomes from individual classes to improving outcomes across the institution. This expanded role matches faculty, department, and institutional needs.

Introduction

While many faculty have made SOTL work central to their professional lives, many postsecondary institutions are still asking what it is, what can be done with it, and how they can measure and evaluate it as part of faculty workloads. As Eileen Bender (2005) suggests, while faculty report being engaged and energized by SOTL, they are less positive about their institution's acceptance of SOTL as legitimate scholarship. Mike Theall (2006) comes to a similar conclusion in his review of O'Meara and Rice's *Faculty Priorities Reconsidered*. In assessing the state of institutional efforts to integrate SOTL work, Theall calls for reconceptualizing the professoriate in tandem with SOTL programs that "address relevant local issues, focus on learning, ...[and] target improved campus policies and processes for assessment and for faculty development and evaluation" (p. 928).

As Bender and Theall suggest, campus SOTL initiatives need to promote educational reform on three different levels: 1) assisting faculty in evaluating, improving, and deepening their students' learning, 2) building campus communities that support and refine inquiry into student learning, and 3) challenging institutional attitudes and policies about teaching. Viewing SOTL work in this way broadens the scope for improving student learning outcomes from individual classes to improving outcomes across programs, curricular areas, departments, and different colleges. In this article we highlight how SOTL has become successfully integrated into these three levels of our campus culture.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Peer Review of Teaching Project

SOTL work cannot be done in isolation on a campus, but rather needs to be purposely linked into the research and teaching mission of a particular institution. Such is the case for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln is a land grant, Ph.D. granting Carnegie classified High-Intensive Research Institution. UNL defines its tripartite

mission of teaching, research, and outreach as foundationally organized around a shared commitment to inquiry:

Each of the functions of a great public land grant research university—teaching, research and scholarship, and outreach—is organized around a shared commitment to inquiry and the communication of the knowledge resulting from that inquiry. (UNL Blue Sky Report, 2003)

This commitment to inquiry is an organizing principle for UNL’s Peer Review of Teaching Project (PRTP), a project that sponsors faculty SOTL inquiry.

Started in 1994, the PRTP is a campus faculty development program that introduces faculty to SOTL by supporting them in making visible the serious intellectual work of their teaching (Bernstein, Burnett, Goodburn, & Savory, 2006). From 1994 to 2004, the project was supported from external research grants (FIPSE, Pew Charitable Trust) along with matching assistance from the university. Huber (2004) provides a detailed description of the project’s history. Since 2004, the project has been completely funded by our institution through the office of the Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (i.e., Provost).

The PRTP supports faculty in a year-long program in which they document student learning in a target course and then create an electronic course portfolio showcasing their inquiry. A course portfolio is a reflective investigation of how the course structures, teaching techniques, and assessment strategies enhance or detract from student learning. It provides a window into what occurred during the course, highlights what worked and what did not, and showcases the student learning that resulted. Over the year, faculty meet as a group and in small teams to discuss literature about teaching and the assessment of learning, to write about one of their courses, and to develop and share their course portfolios. Creating a portfolio for documenting their teaching is often a faculty member’s first exposure to SOTL. Underlying our project is Michael Reder’s (2007) conception of teaching “as a collaborative practice (something

done within a larger community that is open to discussion) and a critical practice (something shared with an eye toward discovery, integration, refinement, and improvement)” (p. 11).

In the past seven years, 170 UNL faculty members from 44 different academic units and 8 different colleges have participated in our year-long program. Their course portfolios, along with those from other schools, are archived on our project website:

<http://www.courseportfolio.org>. Participation in the year-long project is voluntary and there is often a waiting list each year. Typically half of the participants are pre-tenure faculty.

Drawing upon Randy Bass’s (1999) notion of viewing one’s teaching as “a set of problems worth pursuing as an ongoing intellectual focus,” many UNL faculty want to continue their classroom inquiry after their first year. Through an advanced program, the PRTP supports interested faculty in developing more formal inquiries into their teaching and exploring opportunities for sharing their work in public ways (Savory, Burnett, Goodburn, 2007). During the past seven years, project participants have developed two book chapters, eleven journal articles, and fifty-four conference presentations, workshops, or poster sessions based on their work in the PRTP. Faculty welcome these opportunities to be more scholarly in their teaching and support campus efforts around it.

The story of how the PRTP has become integrated into the fabric of UNL illustrates the need for SOTL initiatives to be responsive and flexible to the institution’s needs. In 2002, UNL’s teaching and learning center was discontinued after a round of budget cuts. This closure was viewed by many faculty as the death knell for teaching on campus. Surprisingly, that has not been the case. While the demise of the Teaching and Learning Center certainly left a void, particularly for faculty who desire one-on-one consultations regarding particular teaching concerns, the PRTP has helped to fill an important niche. The PRTP does not offer all of the functions that a teaching center typically performs, but the project’s SOTL focus provides a valuable means for faculty to explore, reflect upon, and document how their course objectives, their teaching practices, and learning approaches impact student learning. In the remainder of

this paper, we discuss how SoTL inquiry supported by the PRTP has become integrated into campus instructional and institutional processes.

Using SOTL for Faculty Development

One of the primary goals of the PRTP is to help faculty develop a vocabulary and methods of inquiry around teaching for improved student learning. In this respect, the PRTP focuses on formative teaching development, providing opportunities for faculty to carefully reflect upon their teaching and, in some cases, to sponsor a new understanding for how the intellectual work entailed in teaching can be made visible. The PRTP is not viewed as a remedial program to “fix” problem teachers, but rather as a scholarly activity to learn better approaches for documenting the intellectual effort one puts into designing and teaching a course. This approach to SOTL often invites faculty to develop a sense of ownership and engagement around their teaching. For instance, in responding to a question about how the PRTP challenged or extended ideas about teaching and students’ learning, a faculty member from Communications comments:

Learning about the scholarship of teaching and learning has opened my eyes to a new approach to instruction. I am now much more systematic in the design of course objectives and activities. More importantly, I feel more confident in my assessment techniques and therefore I am able to more accurately assess student outcomes and make appropriate changes. One of the best results of being involved in this program is that it gets me excited and engaged in my courses, which obviously spills over into the classroom. J. Soliz (PRTP impact survey, 2009).

In the process of writing about their students’ learning, faculty often make discoveries about their teaching that cycle back into course design and curricular revision. In talking about the project, a faculty member in Special Education and Communication Disorders describes her experience in this way:

Through my participation, I was amazed and embarrassed to discover that I had course objectives I never taught, I had course objectives I taught but never assessed, I had course objectives I assessed and never taught, and I had material I taught and assessed but never listed as a course objective. By reorganizing the goals of my course, developing rubrics for evaluating student work, and assessing my classroom activities, I now have a focused approach for linking my teaching to my students' learning. C. Marvin (PRTP impact survey, 2004).

These faculty members' formative reflections about their teaching often lead to more summative purposes for their work. For example, faculty have used their course portfolios in support of teaching award applications, teaching portfolios, annual reviews, and promotion and tenure files. Initially course portfolios were viewed with indifference by committees and administrators, but over time, as a large cohort of faculty have continued to develop them, they are now welcome and have become more integrated into institutional structures. For example, UNL's College of Arts and Sciences revised its bylaws to include course portfolios as an optional element in documenting teaching performance. Faculty seeking promotion from associate to full professor on the basis of teaching have had their course portfolios externally reviewed by peers at other institutions as a measure of their teaching effectiveness. In this respect, SOTL inquiry that emphasizes individual faculty development has begun to make inroads in how faculty document and make visible their work for institutional moments of review and evaluation.

Using SOTL for Program Development

The benefits of SOTL on individual faculty members are often apparent. But SOTL work can also benefit a department or program. By asking faculty to reflect upon and analyze their teaching practices in a systematic and structured manner, the PRTP provides a mechanism for starting interdisciplinary and interdepartmental campus conversations about program goals,

course prerequisites, and linkages between courses. As Dan Bernstein and Randy Bass (2005) describe,

[T]he process encourages development of a community of teachers inquiring into the success of their students. These communities function like informal groups of scholars who discuss the early stages of their research and creative efforts; participants receive intellectual commentary and social support (p. 39).

This type of discussion is both deliberate and spontaneous. When the PRTP was originally structured, participants were comprised of faculty from department teams. This approach sponsored intense discussions for the department teams, often focusing their inquiry around department majors or sequences of courses. For example, a faculty team from Political Science documented student learning in some of the core courses in the major, including lower-division courses that met the university's general educational goals. The resulting conversations allowed them to learn about each other's student performance, learn how their students' work compared, and to explore raising their expectations for these courses. Similarly, a team of four English Department faculty used their course portfolios to assess curricular connections across a new English major concentration. And a team of four faculty from Visual Literacy (a multi-disciplinary program) used their course portfolios to analyze connections in their sequenced 8-week course rotation and to revise course projects.

While successful, the department team approach for SOTL also posed challenges for faculty who wanted to join the PRTP but who couldn't persuade department colleagues to participate, particularly if they were the only ones in their department to teach in a specific area. To be responsive to these faculty, the PRTP evolved, first soliciting faculty partners to participate and then eventually opening the project to any individual faculty member who wanted to apply. Similar to how Cotton (2006) at the University of Plymouth found a need for staff from diverse disciplines to forge a link for teaching and learning, a positive by-product of this change was increased faculty collaboration across departments and programs. Faculty often found

connections across their teaching that could never have been anticipated. For instance, a group of faculty who teach large lecture courses in psychology, accounting, and management, studied how to develop multiple-choice exams that required application of theory and knowledge rather than rote memorization. A team of four distance education instructors (each teaching an internet-based course) focused their participation on exploring the technology, their approaches for teaching, and their means for measuring student learning in a distance education environment. In a conversation about how the PRTP promotes discussions about teaching, a faculty member from Industrial Engineering described the value of cross-collaborative inquiry into teaching in this way:

...I was surprised to realize that the focused discussions with other project participants have had the biggest impact on me. Whether one is teaching a large lecture in engineering, economics, or psychology, there are similar teaching and student learning issues in terms of classroom management, presentation of materials, and student assessment. Due to the nature of the project, we were able to share our issues, offer suggestions, and explore best practices among academic disciplines that would rarely interact. S. Hallbeck (PRTP impact survey, 2007)

Beyond focusing on improved student learning within their own particular courses, these cross-college collaborations have helped faculty to gain broader understandings of what students face in UNL's overall university curriculum. One former project participant from English summarizes the project's impact on her teaching in this way:

Thanks to the PRTP, I've been thinking a LOT about what would be compelling to others on campus as solid evidence of my students' learning. Not so much because I'm preoccupied with "proving to others who don't get it" that my students learn—but because the PRTP reminded me in really productive way that I am part of a cross-campus community of teachers who are dedicated to student learning. My peers in PRTP reminded me of how high the bar can productively be for our students as they

move across campus. It sent me back to my classroom re-engaged in a way I hadn't expected. D. Minter (PRTP impact survey, 2009).

In addition to supporting conversations, SOTL work has also helped to address programmatic and assessment needs that departments face on our campus. Many institutions conduct periodic examinations, or "academic program reviews" of their academic units, departments, or programs. Similarly, many programs seek external accreditation and renewal. Each review involves an enormous amount of time as unit members gather evidence and organize it for local and outside reviewers. Faculty members and unit leaders spend considerable time reflecting on the evidence and learning from it, and while that time is often seen as well spent, the time and energy devoted to gathering and organizing data is rarely perceived to be inherently valuable.

At UNL, several departments have used PRTP course portfolios to aid these assessment moments. A systematic presentation of the materials found in course portfolios (and other SOTL documents) provides a ready source of information about student learning for a unit. The Construction Management Department used course portfolios developed by five of their faculty to document program outcomes for an accreditation visit. Similarly, the accreditation coordinator for the College of Journalism and Mass communication describes how the college will use faculty members' SOTL work in their upcoming assessment:

Assessment is a new accrediting standard set forth by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications. Over the past five years, eight journalism faculty members have produced 14 course portfolios as fellows of the Peer Review of Teaching Project and three more are completing portfolios this year. The course portfolios are an important component of our college's assessment at the course level and have provided evidence of student learning that was used to improve the curriculum. F. Hachtmann (personal communication, 2009).

When a unit routinely keeps course portfolios from strategically identified courses, analyzing and assessing the overall state of learning in the unit is much simpler. The reporting for the teaching part of the review is also simplified, since faculty and leaders of the unit have already identified where student learning is strongest and where student learning might be increased through enhanced efforts. In this way, SOTL inquiry has become integrated within departmental and programmatic units on our campus.

Using SOTL for institutional development

Similar to how Huber and Hutchings (2005) define the role of the “teaching commons”, beyond assessment at a department level, SOTL work can have a powerful impact on the institution. Key outcomes of the PRTP have been to develop a group of faculty who have a common language and vocabulary about how to discuss the intellectual work of the scholarship of teaching, who are better able to assess teaching, and who can create and advocate campus teaching policies. A faculty member from Art and Art History summarizes the impact of her participation in this way:

By participating in Peer Review I am part of a community of teachers and scholars who are committed to teaching excellence and who generously share their experiences and their expertise. Peer Review makes teaching a rigorously intellectual and yet intensely practical and immensely satisfying activity. It helps me counter isolation and prevent burn-out and it gives me the tools and courage I need to take a critical look at my teaching and my students’ learning. Ingraham (PRTP impact survey, 2009)

The impact of this community is evident on campus committees and in campus leadership through their demands for higher quality documentation for campus award applications and promotion and tenure files.

Similar to how SOTL work can aid a department in a program review, it also can aid in the accreditation of the institution. As Bender (2005) suggests:

The regional accreditation agencies are increasingly insisting that every institution seeking accreditation demonstrate its effectiveness by gathering, analyzing, and disseminating evidence of student learning outcomes. In coming years, the very institutions now inclined to marginalize SOTL may well support it as a powerful tool for such assessment (p. 49).

As part of UNL's recent accreditation review by the Higher Learning Commission, the university created a virtual resource room where many of the PRTP's course portfolios were highlighted.

SOTL work has shaped other university initiatives as well. Recently UNL passed a comprehensive reform of its general education program titled Achievement Centered Education (ACE). This program requires students to take ten learning outcomes-based courses and for departments to collect and analyze student work on these outcomes for institutional assessment. The PRTP's influence on this reform effort is quite visible—various ACE structures for documenting teaching and learning are based upon PRTP guidelines and many of the faculty members responsible for developing ACE course proposals are former PRTP participants. In future years, the PRTP will recruit faculty members teaching ACE courses to further support the institution's goals in assessing the student learning outcomes.

Beyond supporting curricular efforts, SOTL can play an important role in helping institutions obtain external research funding. Initially some may say that this statement is counterintuitive. After all, many faculty are initially hesitant to engage in SOTL work because they feel that time spent on classroom inquiry is time not spent on their disciplinary research. It has been found, however, that helping faculty to better define, reflect upon, and document students learning makes them more effective in terms of developing grants and the subsequent education plans that are often a part of them. For example, the National Science Foundation sponsors the CAREER grant. A key component of this grant is an educational plan for sharing the resulting disciplinary research work with students. Due to the competitiveness of this grant,

the quality of the educational component of the proposal is often what distinguishes which grants are funded and which are not. Former PRTP participants have received over \$1.8 million in external grants for funding disciplinary research. These faculty attribute their project participation for helping them develop the pedagogical skills and assessment strategies central to securing these grants. In this way, SOTL inquiry has furthered, rather than thwarted, external funding opportunities for our campus.

Finally, we have seen the PRTP's impact on how our campus structures and rewards teaching. UNL recently announced a named professorship in teaching to recognize sustained and extraordinary levels of teaching excellence. This professorship for teaching excellence is commensurate in stipend and recognition with professorships traditionally given for outstanding research records. As part of the submission process for this professorship, faculty are required to submit course portfolios and have external review letters about their teaching. Also in 2008, the university formalized a new type of academic position—professors of practice—which are renewable non-tenure track lines that parallel tenure-track titles of assistant, associate, and full professor but which primarily emphasize instructional activities. For promotion, faculty will need to demonstrate national leadership, recognition, and impact of their teaching. The PRTP is especially equipped to help these faculty document their teaching and students' learning and to engage in SOTL activities which will support their promotion files.

Conclusion

Successful integration of SOTL into institutional processes is facilitated when SOTL supports the institution's needs for faculty development, programmatic curricular development, review and accreditation, and other institutionally valued criteria such as research funding. Of course, one has to determine the extent to which faculty leaders should pursue their own goals versus support or comply with institutional initiatives. One of the strengths of the PRTP is that it is led by faculty and participants are encouraged to select target courses based on their own

goals and to investigate areas in teaching and learning which they most care about. These principles of voluntary participation and faculty ownership over course portfolios will not be compromised regardless of institutional pressures to do otherwise. While our project will, in the future, support faculty teaching ACE courses, for instance, we will not let this focus override other faculty purposes for participation. While SOTL integration requires flexible and ongoing responses to university initiatives and goals, maintaining a level of independence is also important. Teaching initiatives and administrators come and go. But being flexible and constantly assessing and rethinking approaches, SOTL can have a valued and enduring role in a postsecondary institution.

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