

"The Many Discourses of the Scholarship of Teaching"

A conference sponsored by
The Center for the Scholarship of Teaching (CST)
at Michigan State University
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notes by Dave Van Domelen

I attended the opening conference for the CST and took copious notes. Nine pages of notes, in fact. Despite that, I didn't cover everything that happened, and there are bound to be some gaps and biases evident. However, hopefully this file should be useful for those who weren't able to attend the conference.

"Executive Summary"

Scholarship of Teaching, to be referred to as SoT hereafter, is the subject of a lot of scrutiny and interest these days. But there isn't really an established definition of what it is, let alone plans in place to get SoT accepted universally. Hence, the first job of the CST is to determine what, exactly, SoT is. Or at least get people thinking about the question.

The upshot of the conference seems to be that SoT must involve treating teaching like we treat our "real" research. That includes careful documentation of our work, translation of the results into a form that others can understand, reflections on the implications of the work, and making the work (both results AND process) available to the public (or at least to other instructors). Additionally, SoT must be placed within a context to be useful. Generic SoT doesn't really help "in the trenches", people need to know how it applies to teaching their specific subject area.

Additionally, most agreed that engaging in SoT can be risky for those not already ensconced at the highest level of academia they wish to climb to. SoT is not recognized as valid work by many (most) universities in the same way that grant-writing, publication or even student evaluation forms are recognized. Plus, engaging in SoT takes time away from those other pursuits. No simple solution was proposed for this situation, and the trailbreakers are simply going to have to accept the professional risks involved.

NOVEMBER 1 - MORNING

"Teaching Among The Scholarships", Lee Shulman, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

The axiom "publish or perish" applies to the ideas themselves, too. If you don't publish an idea, it might as well be dead.

Measuring and writing are the two fundamental unnatural acts we perform that set us apart from other species. Scholarship amplifies this by recounting and narrating.

SoT can really help learning when it operates in an iterative mode (research -> curriculum development -> instruction -> back to research). Never forget that learning is the reason behind teaching, and we have a professional obligation to improve things.

While "students are not passing the course" is a valid reason for performing SoT, it's not the only reason. Sometimes you need the reflection that SoT brings in order to realize that you're not actually teaching the domain you claim to be teaching. The students have learned to play the game and get good marks, but they can't really learn the subject, since you're not teaching it. For example, simply listing the results of scientific research isn't really teaching science, since you're missing the actual process of science.

Be methodical, go public, go online!

To do proper research on X, you always end up doing less of X itself, regardless of what X is. You need to take the time to document, deliberate and disseminate. In most areas, this is accepted implicitly, but in teaching, anything that isn't time spent in front of the class or preparing for class isn't considered teaching.

Having to step back and figure out how to explain what you're doing invokes a new mode of scholarship and fleshes things out.

Interaction with peers, making the private public and finding new representations are all parts of scholarship.

NOTHING is beyond the purview of a research institution, including the institution itself! Reflection need not only apply to the person, it can also apply to the institution.

Discussion:

Cathy Bristow (MSU, Entomology)

Students are starting to realize that SoT is happening, and they want to benefit from it.

While the circle or roundtable has been used as a common metaphor for those engaged collaboratively in SoT, a better metaphor might be the "star" of dancing, where everyone joins hands in the center, leaving a free hand to reach outward. Thus, the SoT group focuses on a common center (hands joined inside) and connects to those outside the group (hands extended to the outside).

Steve Weiland (MSU, Educational Administration)

SoT needs to pay attention to: 1) Disciplines, 2) Age differences and 3) Rhetorical attractiveness (how good a read is it?).

Don't lose sight of the value of anecdotes and biographies in the rush to seize onto more rigorous research methods. Not only do anecdotes etc have their value, but they also offer a place for people to contribute when they don't have the time or skill or desire to perform in a more rigorous way.

SoT needs writers who are engaging and interesting. Often the most-read work is not the one with the best science, but the one with the best ability to grab the reader's imagination. The hope is to get a writer who can combine both.

General Q&A observations/comments

"The Invisible College" is the informal process by which we interact and exchange scholarship. Like the watercooler chat, it will be killed if formalized. We want to keep the Invisible College alive while also bringing in a formal process, rather than trying to replace the IC with a formal process.

Before we can try to introduce systematic change, we need to have a baseline system to work with. There's no real evidence that there exists a standard university procedure, making it harder to generate sweeping change.

An emphasis on SoT must not be allowed to overwhelm the value of "merely" excellent teaching that doesn't involve scholarship.

The difference between a "case" and an "anecdote" is that cases make theoretical claims.

Videotaping your own teaching is daunting, but important.

"Work In Progress with Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) Fellows"

This session had a quartet of CASTL fellows discussing their current work in SoT and trying to define what SoT means.

Curt Bennett (MSU, Mathematics)

His goal was to help students see what mathematics really was, rather than just a bunch of memorized formulae and procedures.

Bennett used mini-research projects in class. Students tend to see "research" as meaning "literature search," and Bennett wanted to show them that it was more than that.

So far some promise, but too early for real results.

Robert Bain (UMich, Education)

Amplification of the directive, "Go beyond the product of the field to the **meaning** of the field." Not just in the domain you teach, but also in SoT: don't focus on the educational techniques, look at the ideas underlying the techniques.

One needs to share both the epistemological stance (how you think) and the pedagogical stance (how you teach) in order to promote SoT. But how can we make visible the epistemologically-grounded bases of our pedagogy? And how can we simultaneously teach content and pedagogy?

Deborah Smith (MSU, Teacher Education)

Mixed pedagogy and process/content in teaching scientific methods for elementary education teachers, using a modeling approach with group learning (no mention of whether this was related to modeling as espoused by Hestenes of Arizona State).

Pointed out that the status game is a normal part of life (get higher status for yourself, look to those above you for guidance, etc), and that many new approaches break the rules of the status game. This can cause student confusion and resentment, but those who can put aside the status game learn a lot better.

Colleen Tremonte (MSU, James Madison School)

Initially thought that since SoT is critical, self-aware, transferable and communal, it would be trivial to apply it to her Composition Studies course. Turned out to be not so easy. Skills are very domain-specific, and nothing is as transferable as you might hope. Since joining CASTL, she's found how strongly discipline specialty can affect things.

NOVEMBER 1 - AFTERNOON

"The Changing Cultures of K Through...22" - David Damrosch (Columbia University, English)

Premise: Education is a form of acculturation.

Problem: Secondary education and university education involve drastically different forms of culture.

Propositions:

- 1) There exist multiple educational cultures at every level of instruction. There are differences both within a level and between levels.
- 2) Undergraduate "educulture" (my term, not Damrosch's) is the lynchpin of our "Neocolonial" system of education, in which the raw materials are brought in from the "colonies" of secondary education, and then the best results kept for the university use (as professors) while the products that don't fit our educulture are shipped back to the pre-college schools as teachers. (This, of course, is an oversimplification that ignores the fact that most don't go into any sort of education after graduation.)
- 3) Top-down attempts at reform tend to reproduce the same inequalities they seek to address.

Acquisition of a skill depends strongly on the culture within which you acquire the skill. An anecdote was presented about windsurfing in the 1980s. Most windsurfers came out of three previous cultures: skiing, surfing and sailing. The ski people took classes together to learn and windsurfed as a group. The surfers learned by trial and error on their own, and surfed out alone. And the sailors learned from books and then raced each other.

Similarly, people in college can be split up into such groups. The "Collegians" treat school as more of a social experience (like the skiers), "Rebels" do their own thing, and can excel in areas that interest them, but fail in others (like the surfers) and the future professors learn from books and then COMPETE! Again, an oversimplification, but it demonstrates the cultural differences within the college level. And while most professors come from the third group, the third group is the smallest of all, while the Collegiates are the largest. Hence, most people are being taught by someone from an alien culture. However, most K-12 teachers are Collegiates, which makes things even more fun...high school students get worked into one academic culture by their secondary teachers, then they get tossed into an entirely different culture. Even the future academics have been acculturated to the Collegiate model of education.

However, professors simply going into K-12 to lend a hand (a sort of noblesse oblige) aren't very effective because of the cultural divide. K-12 teachers are often embarrassed by these visits, because the professor unintentionally treats the teachers like uneducated savages, pedagogically speaking. Top-down reform attempts simply exacerbate this situation, since those at the top are often the most extreme adherents to their respective cultures.

For any reforms to work, they have to start with the teachers, and they have to start from an understanding of the different cultures. K-12 teachers must be glad to get help, not mortified. And university professors need to understand the cultural rules by which K-12 teaching is done, so they don't try to judge them by wholly inappropriate (and sometimes condescending) standards.

Discussion:

Patty Stock (MSU, English)

The Composition 101 course has traditionally had to bridge the gap between K-12 and University educultures because of the heavy use of undergraduate TAs to run the courses. Since the TAs have not been either moved into academic culture or selected out for non-university work, they still bear a wide range of educultural backgrounds.

Lee Shulman

University faculty educulture is predicated on the idea of maximum spread and minimum overlap, so that all the sub-specialties are covered as well as possible. K-12 faculty educulture hinges on a lot of overlap so that a teacher can be used most efficiently at a school. What's missing in the middle is a layer of skilled generalists who can teach undergraduate courses well (such used to be more common before universities went in for greater specialization). They don't need to be as specialized as their research faculty counterparts, but neither do they need to cover as many subjects as a K-12 teacher. SoT is one mechanism by which we might be able to bring back these skilled generalists.

Community Colleges and Junior Colleges actually see more post-secondary students than 4-year colleges and universities, and many (if not most) PhD recipients who teach end up teaching at these CoCos and JuCos. Such teachers definitely need to be skilled generalists and need to be involved in SoT. SoT can also help such PhDs deal with the guilt feelings imposed by Grad educulture over not doing research.

BREAKOUT SESSIONS (concurrent)

"Developing a scholarship of teaching in teacher education and K-12 teaching" - did not attend this session.

"Fireside chat with David Damrosch for doctoral students" - PhD students only, so I didn't attend this one either.

"Creating an Institutional Culture in which the Scholarship of Teaching is Valued"

This session addressed four basic questions:

- 1) What do we mean by an Institutional Culture in which the Scholarship of Teaching is Valued, and what are the characteristics of such a culture?
- 2) To what extent is such a culture evident at MSU?
- 3) How is such a culture created: what are critical ingredients, factors and choices?
- 4) What are the challenges in creating such a culture, and how can they be addressed?

1) Essentially, an institutional culture values SoT when there's a palpable feeling that you can engage in SoT without undue risk to your career. In such a culture, SoT has been made a part of the evaluation process for faculty, you don't need to make a special effort to engage in it instead of "normal" research, and there's a sustained community of SoT workers rather than scattered and short-lived efforts.

When SoT is only valued on paper, only the trailbreakers will engage in it. Protection from undue risk can be obtained, but it must be done on a case by case basis. If you just start doing SoT, it's on your own head if things go awry.

2) Right now, MSU seems to be at the "valued on paper" level. It's not too hard to get a proposal accepted, but you have to make that special effort. And the work is still largely scattered and hidden, without any widespread sharing or making public of results.

3) Not sure on this one. We spent more time talking about the other questions, and didn't really get many useful suggestions here. But it seems to be an emergent process. After many, many individual efforts succeed in getting rooted, eventually institutional support gels. Hopefully at a rate faster than the adage "You don't convince people of new ideas, you simply outlive those who don't agree."

4) The main challenge to those engaged in SoT is to remove the other challenges. We're trailbreakers, but eventually we also have to become roadbuilders and smooth the path for those who would follow. We need to set up networks, establish precedents, rework the criteria for tenure and promotion, and establish that SoT is "real" research before people will flock to it.

NOVEMBER 2 - MORNING

"Crossing Boundaries to Create a Scholarship of K-12 and University Teaching" - Deborah Ball (elementary teacher), Hyman Bass (MSU, Math)

In this session, Ball and Bass gave a case study of their work in attempting to improve elementary math education over the course of the past ten years. The educultural clash was evident at first, but both had the perseverance to keep working until they understood where the other was coming from.

The importance of keeping good records was stressed by both. Not just records of results, but of every step of the process. They communicated mainly by email, and kept every email sent. This let them look back later and see what had worked and why.

The work demonstrated how critical the content area is to the pedagogy. The two things are entangled, you cannot meaningfully separate them.

Commentary:

Joan Ferrini Mundy (MSU, Math) pointed out that the challenge of the Center for the Scholarship of Teaching is to get more collaborations like this one working.

Lee Shulman

"Pedagogical Content Knowledge" is a sort of "undiscovered country" in educational research, it's hard to define or even prove the existence of. But the Ball/Bass work seems to be a step towards doing both.

K-6 math pedagogy is all about surprises and interesting things, letting the students mess around and discover stuff. It requires the teacher be on their toes, but can be fun for all involved. 7-12 math pedagogy buckles down and tries to make sure everyone gets ramrodded through the orthodox content knowledge so they'll be ready for college. There's little room for surprises, and it's much harder to be prepared for where things could go if you allowed the sort of unbridled discover as in K-6. As a result, it's dull by design. And we wonder why people hate math. Of course, a full discovery mode for higher level math would be really difficult to teach, but we should anticipate it by helping teachers learn enough math to pull it off.

Students come into class with their own rule sets (such as notions of fairness) that they then try to apply to everything else. This can result in odd discussions.

"Teaching as a Laboratory for the Exploration of One's Scholarly Pursuits" - Panel discussion

David Labaree (MSU, History)

Outside research topics can be suggested by experiences in the classroom, especially in disciplines where students can raise useful questions. This is more likely in the humanities and social sciences, where a lot of questions exist that are both unanswered, and framable by non-experts. It's a bit harder in the sciences, as students may not have the background to ask a useful question.

There's a catch-22 in teaching. The more you teach a class, the more familiar you become with the topic, but the more ritualized and deadened the actual teaching becomes. Bringing in research topics can help keep the class fresh for everyone, in addition to making the subject seem more real.

Stephen Esquith (MSU, Philosophy)

Re-emphasizes the catch-22 above. Getting students actively involved in the research with you can also help.

Larry Busch (MSU, Sociology)

There's a serious impediment to using students in research, especially in the areas where they can be best used...the Human Subjects board. Getting clearance for the work can take longer than a semester, making it hard to **really** involve the students in all aspects of the work, and keeping the results from being published. This is one area in which the sciences have a slight edge, since if you can find a project the students can work on, it doesn't usually need Human Subjects approval. Although it can still be a nightmare with the copyright office.

Students don't really know where the boundaries between disciplines are, or even that there ARE boundaries in some cases. So if you want to work with students in SoT, it's important to be willing to leave the boundaries behind and go where the inquiry leads you.

NOVEMBER 2 - AFTERNOON

BREAKOUT SESSIONS

"General Education: An Occasion for Scholarly Discourse about Teaching"
- Did not attend.

"Fireside chat for doctoral students with Lee Shulman" - Did not attend.

"Reassessing the Scholarship of Teaching: The Effect on Promotions and Tenure"

This was a pretty small session, less than ten people all told showed up. I guess the General Education session was packed.

When looking at a new approach to teaching, four questions must be asked, and only the first is usually ever answered:

- 1) Will it improve learning?
- 2) How much more time will it take than the old way?
- 3) Will the effort count for promotion/tenure?
- 4) How will the students react to it?

#2 is important for implementation, as many teachers don't have more time to devote to teaching. And even if they do, if you get a small improvement in learning for a threefold increase in effort, few will adopt it.

#3 is important for continuity. If you devise a great new pedagogy that is wildly successful in class, but in doing so you spend less time on "real" research and get passed over for tenure, the effort will die with your job. And if people think they might fail to get tenure if they spend time on SoT, they will be less likely to try SoT.

#4 reflects on #1 and #3, and can also invoke a paradox in which the students learn more but the instructor is punished for the effort. For instance, a teaching method like Modeling which abrogates the old "status-seeking" culture may get students to learn, but many will resent the change in the way the world works, and give the instructor bad student evaluations.

Also, in considering how to deal with the effect of SoT on promotion and tenure, one must keep in mind the large degree in variability both between institutions (not all R1 schools are created equal) and within institutions (Physics and English have rather different real requirements for tenure, even if they look similar on paper). Some departments have too much emphasis on research (with SoT not being "real" research) and others have too much emphasis on teaching (with SoT not being "real" teaching).

Performing SoT can mess you up in three big ways when it comes to trying for tenure or promotion:

- 1) You're not doing as much "real" research or getting as many grants.
- 2) You're not publishing as much (SoT work has a longer cycle time for experiments, and there's less venues).
- 3) Students may hate you.

Wrap-Up Panel

Invoking "Who, What, Where, How, Why?" of reporters, we can ask the following important questions about SoT:

WHO will have access to the results of our work?

WHAT are good SoT practices?

WHERE will this all be published?

HOW will we know good SoT results when we see them?

WHY should anyone care?

We need to consider how "What You Know" affects "How You Teach."

We need faster turnaround on the feedback process, either by speeding up publication itself, or by introducing an intermediate step (like the Los Alamos online preprint archive) to let SoT researchers get constructive feedback before the iron has gone cold. On the other hand, we also need a strong peer review process to counter the bad rap SoT has as dealing with squishy soft knowledge.

CASTL has a three-tiered online publishing model in the planning stages to try and address some of these problems.

The lowest level is private access, password protected and all that. Only you and a few close colleagues will have access to the work, but it will be accessible from anywhere in the world with the right password. This will help collaborations get off the ground without having to do all their own infrastructure work (as Ball and Bass had to do).

The next level up is wide access within the field, but still limited to those in SoT. Consider this like the preprint archive...interested professionals can poke around in the work and make suggestions, use results in their own work, etc. But it's still not open to everyone, and there's still password protection (important for copyright purposes).

The top level is the showroom. These are the nice, polished works that are open to everyone, either in the public domain or through for-profit publication. The former is preferred from an academic standpoint, but the latter will probably be necessary to get things disseminated.