

What is The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning? An Opening Conversation

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is a central pillar of the University's Curriculum Redefined project. The following is a brief introduction to getting into SoTL at the University of Leeds. Structured around five opening questions, the dialogic structure is an invitation to a longer-term individual and collective reflection on — and engagement with — the emergent practices which make up SoTL within the University and the broader national and international higher education sectors.

1. What is the strategic context for SoTL in the University?

In its ten-year strategy 'Universal Values, Global Change' the University asserts its commitment to its role as a civic institution, one 'that harnesses expertise in research and education to help shape a better future for humanity, working through collaboration to tackle inequalities, benefit society and drive change'. Key to delivering on its civic mission is the development of transformative educational programmes 'focused on helping students from diverse backgrounds to develop the knowledge and skills they need to succeed and make a positive impact on the world'. Emerging from the University's core civic mission, the Curriculum Redefined project aims to deliver a reimagined and sustainable curricular offer underpinned by evidence-informed pedagogical design. As a fundamentally research-led and evidence-informed educational practice, SoTL is therefore integral to building the individual and institutional capabilities on which sustainable educational transformation relies.

2. Where does the term 'SoTL' come from?

It was the late American academic Ernest L. Boyer who first made substantive use of the term 'scholarship of teaching'. In his seminal 1990 book 'Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate', Boyer laid out his compelling vision for an integrated 'scholarly' academic practice that bridges the traditional research-teaching divide:

We believe the time has come to move beyond the tired old "teaching versus research" debate and give the familiar and honourable term "scholarship" a broader, more capacious meaning, one that brings legitimacy to the full scope of academic work. Surely, scholarship means engaging in original research. But the work of the scholar also means stepping back from one's investigation, looking for connections, building bridges between theory and practice, and communicating one's knowledge effectively to students. Specifically, we conclude that the work of the professoriate might be thought of as having four separate, yet overlapping, functions. These are: the scholarship of discovery; the scholarship of integration; the scholarship of application; and the scholarship of teaching. (p.16)

With his radical vision for a re-imagined scholarly practice, Boyer mapped out the contours of a debate that continues to be a defining problematic of SoTL (and the broader field of higher education research and policy) to this day: 'is it possible to define the work of faculty in ways that reflect more realistically the full range of academic and civic mandates?' (p.16)

Continuing Boyer's re-examination of academic practice in their 1995 article 'From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education', Robert B. Barr and John Tagg crystallised the paradigm shift represented by the emergence of (the facilitation) of learning as the core educational mission for higher education institutions in the United States:

A paradigm shift is taking hold in American higher education. In its briefest form, the paradigm that has governed our colleges is this: A college is an institution that exists to provide instruction. Subtly but profoundly we are shifting to a new paradigm: A college is an institution that exists to produce learning. This shift changes everything. It is both needed and wanted. (p. 13)

These earliest articulations of SoTL mark it out as ‘situated’ within a terrain that is both contested and constantly shifting. Over the succeeding decades, these originating features have intensified with the term functioning increasingly as a “big tent” (Huber and Hutchings, 2005, Chick, 2014) which accommodates a diverse range of definitions and is used to designate a myriad of practices related to teaching and learning. This definitional and operational fluidity together with its implications for entrenching the research-teaching divide have attracted criticism (e.g. Boshier, 2008; Boshier and Huang, 2009; Macfarlane, 2011). The obverse of this fluidity, however, is the immense scope that SoTL presents for creative and critical engagement through the lens of individual and collaborative disciplinary practice.

3. How is SoTL defined at Leeds?

Acknowledging the range of practices designated by the term ‘SoTL’, the University’s ‘Framework for Scholarship: Supporting research, teaching, and social impact’ defines SoTL as ‘the systematic study of teaching and learning, using established or validated criteria of scholarship, to understand how teaching (beliefs, behaviours, attitudes, and values) can maximize learning, and/or develop a more accurate understanding of learning, resulting in products that are publicly shared for critique and use by an appropriate community’ (Potter and Kustra, 2011).

It includes activities such as:

- Undertaking research to investigate, inform, develop, and support teaching and learning activities;
- Obtaining the resources to support pedagogic, or discipline-focused pedagogic, research activity;
- Publishing academic, peer-reviewed work and disseminating findings at relevant research conferences;
- Supervising PGRs/PhD students;
- Working with collaborators and partners to enhance the impact of research.

Source: ‘Framework for Scholarship: Supporting research, teaching, and social impact’

4. What does writing for SoTL look like?

As a practice of writing, the term ‘SoTL’ covers a broad range of writing. Below is a list of the broad generic categories of SoTL writing:

- Books
- Edited collections
- Journal articles
- Professional publications
- Reviews
- Conference proceedings

- Reflective pieces
- Storytelling
- Opinion pieces
- Case studies
- Blog posts
- Fellowship applications (e.g. FHEA, SEDA)
- Scholarship plans
- Listserv contributions
- Social media posts

5. What opportunities are there to develop skills in SoTL?

A new university-wide SoTL development programme to support staff to build SoTL-based competencies across their career is due to be launched in the academic year 2022/23. Further details will be made available via the [OD&PL](#) website.

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