

Countering SoTL Marginalization: A Model for Integrating SoTL with Institutional Initiatives

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Abstract

Despite SoTL's development as a movement, most SoTL work remains institutionally marginalized at the level of classroom inquiry. Institutional planners do not come looking for SoTL to guide their efforts to improve the institution, even when institutional initiatives are squarely centered on teaching and learning. The chasm between SoTL and the institutional radar screen is wide and rarely traveled. Countering the marginalization from the institution that has plagued SoTL up to this point in its evolution requires a process that identifies a common intersection. Research-based frameworks about student learning, such as the [National Survey of Student Engagement](#) (NSSE), can serve as a connective tissue that forges the intersection between SoTL and institutional initiatives. As the connective tissue between SoTL inquiry and institutional priorities is grown, SoTL will "advance practice beyond" and impact institutional decision making and planning, and the broader landscape of institutional initiatives that intersect with learning and teaching.

Introduction

At the classroom level, SoTL findings are often viewed as separate bits of inquiry, valuable to specific courses and their instructors only. Often marginalized from "true" scholarship in the eyes of their institutional or disciplinary peers, SoTL work may not evoke the same respect or carry the same weight as traditional scholarship. At the department level, according to McKinney (2004), "Much SoTL work occurs in isolation, undertaken by one or a small number of faculty members within a department, often working alone" (p. 7). These isolated efforts may develop into individual SoTL silos that resemble the often fragmented and isolated academic department silos. Questions about the generalizability of findings, coupled with the intense pressure to maintain rigorous standards of scholarship, have deterred SoTL scholars from investigating SoTL's impact at the institutional level. At the institutional level, SoTL scholars may find themselves a marginalized and misunderstood community within an institution. They clearly value themselves and one another's scholarship, but may appear as an elite, somewhat puzzling group of teachers who merely study their students. SoTL scholars are not at all uncertain about their impact on their students' learning, but rarely consider how their work might have a broader impact on institutional initiatives. Even though some institutions have revised tenure policies to include SoTL, SoTL may still lurk about at the fringes of the university. At the national level, the SoTL movement has had a number of hurdles to clear since Boyer's 1990 work, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*.

Controversy over SoTL's definition and legitimacy as scholarship created a necessary focus for some time. Establishing and refining and standards of scholarship have been consuming and ongoing challenges throughout the evolution of SoTL. This

preoccupation has allowed SoTL's role within the broader landscape of the institution to continue nearly unexamined. As SoTL programs and scholars have focused almost exclusively on being marginalized from *scholarship*, SoTL has had little time to recognize or address its marginalization from *institutional initiatives* that intersect with learning, and that will ultimately reflect some of the institution's deepest need for changes in teaching and learning. As a result, the broader themes of student learning that underlie the specific SoTL questions and that are likely to matter to the institution are rarely identified and the intersection between SoTL work and institutional priorities is not articulated. Whether highly valued or dismissed as classroom inquiry, SoTL work at most institutions, even within thriving SoTL programs, remains far removed from the institutional radar screen. Why this disconnect?

SoTL advocates, intent on countering the marginalization from traditional scholarship, often believe that if they could just get more faculty doing SoTL, more validation and integration into tenure policies, more money, support, publication and dissemination, and more valuing by others, SoTL would somehow become institutionally mainstreamed. Behind this advocacy is the genuinely deeper wish to transform the institution and impact student learning more broadly and an assumption that SoTL efforts to recruit can somehow "add up" to broader institutional change or a presence on the institutional radar screen.

SoTL's migration from the margins of the *institution* and its priorities rests squarely on whether SoTL scholars and programs, as well as the institution, can each see how SoTL's classroom-based questions and findings can contribute at a much broader institutional level. The chasm between the two has largely gone unnoticed, unexplored and unquestioned. However, even vital SoTL programs have begun to ask, "Is that all there is?"

Called to Go Meta...

SoTL is called to consider impacting institutional practices extending beyond the classroom. Hutchings and Shulman (1999) explain,

A scholarship of teaching requires a kind of 'going meta' in which faculty frame and systematically investigate questions related to student learning... and do so with an eye not only to improving their own classroom but to advancing practice beyond it. (p. 13)

Unfortunately, 'going meta' or 'advancing practice beyond' have been narrowly interpreted. SoTL scholars or programs may answer this call by relying exclusively on "disseminating findings" through publication and presentations. These efforts are essential for enacting the cross disciplinary 'trading zones' where discussion and exchange about SoTL happens formally and informally (Huber & Morreale, 2002). Over time, however, we have erroneously coupled dissemination and publication of SoTL with SoTL becoming valued by the institution and with advancing practice beyond. If institutional impact is even considered, the target has almost singularly

been changing tenure policies. Interestingly, SoTL's evolution over time has demonstrated that the publication and dissemination of SoTL and tenure policy changes alone will not dispel SoTL's marginalization from the institutional radar screen. Fortunately, the limitations of publication and dissemination are becoming clearer as the SoTL movement matures. Atkinson (2001) warned, "Limiting

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning to refereed publication will assure that Scholarship of Teaching and Learning will have little or no impact" (p. 1224). She further argued, "If the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is operationalized only as publishing in journals, we have simply begun to emphasize another research area" (p. 1224). Relying on publications and presentations to make connections to broader campus initiatives hasn't and likely won't work. Even more worrisome is her caution that, if we approach SoTL this narrowly, "The academy will not be transformed. The status quo will prevail." Clearly then, the idea of 'going meta' should not be confused with publications and going public through dissemination, vital as this is to the scholarship of teaching and learning, or any scholarship. What then could be meant by 'advancing practice beyond?' Can SoTL play a significant part in institutional change?

Aligning SoTL with Institutional Initiatives

The call for 'going meta' entails not a greater, but more broadly conceived call to shift SoTL's efforts toward advancing practice *at the institutional level*. McKinney (2004) envisions that, "We will routinely use and apply what we find in our SoTL work to pedagogical, curricular, and institutional reform in our institutions" (p. 14). If "SoTL work can help us implement our missions and strategic plans..." (McKinney, 2004, p. 14), we need a better strategy than that of falling back on wishful thinking that more and more scholars doing SoTL, or more and more publications and dissemination will somehow add up to a tipping point of institutional impact or reform. SoTL involvement with institutional reform requires leaping from a classroom context level to some type of meaningful alignment between SoTL work and institutional level initiatives. SoTL has expanded participation in classroom inquiry and firmly established SoTL beyond that of a passing fad within departments and schools, and institutions. But where is it within the institution, even if firmly established? Is SoTL influencing decisions about learning and reform at the institutional level?

Institutional Initiatives and Planned Change Models

Institutional change is *planned change* and is usually based on a felt or proven *organizational need* to change. In these models, a leader aligns the goals in a linear fashion, driving decisions based on facts. Planned change models operate within the existing organizational paradigms. For example, when institutional needs are brought to light from many credible internal as well as external sources of data, including employers, state exam scores, accrediting agencies, institutional and national data, student evaluations, and reports by other internal task forces, a "performance gap" is exposed that harnesses the attention of institutional leaders. Among the competing institutional needs, several become priorities, and a task force is charged to resolve the problem as part of a planned change process. The scope of the problem or need is defined using a linear and rational process to research the problem, set goals, develop strategies and solutions, and specify timelines and point persons for implementing the plan. Resources are galvanized to support the process of advancing the institutional initiative. Participation on almost any institutional task

force or committee illustrates the way higher education typically uses this type of model to approach change.

This process of making change does not recognize persuasion, exchange and sharing, recruiting or individual need that are the hallmarks of SoTL efforts to change teaching and learning. The distinctions between SoTL and institutional changes process are evident from the following comparison (see Table 2):

Table 2: Comparison of SoTL and Institutional Change Processes

Features	SoTL Change Process	Institutional Change Process
Context of Problem/Need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Individual Classroom ▪ Departmental ▪ Cross-disciplinary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Institutional
Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Exchanging ▪ Persuading ▪ Informing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Problem solving process
Change Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Improved student learning ▪ More SoTL; increase participation ▪ changed attitudes toward SoTL ▪ More publication and dissemination 	Institutional Improvement: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Specific goals ▪ New programs, structures ▪ Gain/decrease in measured outcomes ▪ New services, altered practices, policies
Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Diffusion of innovation ▪ Political ▪ Social Cognition [Recruit, build awareness, convince, network, inform, educate]	Planned Change <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Need outlined ▪ Problem researched ▪ Fact finding, Data driven ▪ Solutions generated ▪ Change implemented
Change Direction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Evolving ▪ Expanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Linear

Looking closely at the distinctions between SoTL and institutional change processes, is it any wonder that SoTL has failed to become integrated at the institutional level and aligned with institutional initiatives? It couldn't be farther from the language and approaches utilized in making institutional change happen.

If we wish for SoTL to advance teaching and learning beyond the classroom, it must translate across the gap between institutional change processes and how SoTL has communicated and packaged itself to the institution. It means moving beyond relying upon SoTL's familiar change processes (that have worked effectively to diffuse SoTL) to intersect with the institution's priorities. It means that SoTL programs need to move beyond the common strategy of getting more people to do SoTL or hoping to develop a critical mass that will eventually change the institution. SoTL programs and scholars need to understand and be knowledgeable about vastly different institutional change processes that bear little resemblance to SoTL change

strategies and identify what they have in common with institutional leaders and their agendas for change. How can this be accomplished?

Missing Link: Research Based Frameworks Linking SoTL and Institutional Initiatives

While seated at the table of institutional planning about initiatives such as retention, diversity, or graduation rates, teaching and learning can seem to take a backseat, if not disappear altogether from the planning process. Data is examined and sliced again and again in order to look at the problem from multiple angles until the scope of the problem is defined within the local institutional context, as well by cohort or

national comparisons. The institution wants to know how it is doing and what it can do to improve. The planning process and discussion of the data itself may not make evident the link to learning or teaching practices and how they may intersect with the desired institutional change. There is no connective tissue between learning and the desired institutional change and usually no mechanism or vehicle for bringing learning, let alone SoTL, onto the table.

Despite the seemingly invisible connections to learning, data tapped to identify and compare indicators of institutional success or failure is often grounded in research on learning. For example, the National Student Survey of Engagement (NSSE) assesses the extent to which an institution's first-year and senior students engage in educational practices associated with high levels of learning and development and is increasingly used to support initiatives, new programs, and changes in structures or practices. NSSE uses five major indicators of successful academic achievement based on years of data from studies in higher education:

- I. Level of Academic Challenge
- II. Active and Collaborative Learning
- III. Student-Faculty Interactions
- IV. Enriching Educational Experiences
- V. Supportive Campus Environments

Each of these five indicators is translated into specific questions that students answer about practices at their institutions. The data from these surveys is often critical to helping institutions determine how to improve. For example, first year initiatives, general education reform, liberal arts initiatives, diversity programs and retention plans often initially rely on NSSE data as part of their self-study in order to identify the problem and define its scope.

The institutional problem is brought into focus through an analysis of multiple sources of data. The process of looking to data to clarify the problem opens a small window of time in which data is welcome, research is examined closely, and the institution studies itself. SoTL work (about a classroom learning problem) is clearly *one* source of data about the students and student learning at the local institution that can inform and lend specificity to developing an understanding of the institutional context or problem under investigation. This opportunity is rarely seized. It is *not* a time of persuading others to *do* SoTL, rather, it is a time of bringing SoTL work to bear upon the problem of improving the institution in terms of the initiative at hand.

In preparation for linking SoTL with the institution's changing priorities, each SoTL project, from its inception, and the underlying broader learning themes, can be explicitly linked to at least one NSSE "benchmark of higher learning and development." Linking each SoTL project to NSSE benchmarks, the intersection between SoTL and the institution's agenda for change becomes explicit and the connective tissue enables a shared language about learning. For example, an analysis of University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's six years of SoTL scholars' work demonstrated how several SoTL projects are easily matched with at least one of the five NSSE benchmarks of student learning (see Table 3).

Table 3: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee SoTL Projects and NSSE Benchmarks

SoTL Scholar	SoTL Question	NSSE Benchmark
SoTL Scholar '03-'04	How do students in First-Year Composition interpret, plan to act on, and respond to instructor feedback on essay drafts?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> III Student-Faculty Interactions IV Enriching Educational Experiences
SoTL Scholar '04-'05	How do students' scores on concept maps indicate ability to transfer knowledge and skills gained from Strategic Management to case analysis? How do concept maps impact students' ability to develop critical thinking skills as evidenced in strategic management case analysis?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IV Enriching Educational Experiences
SoTL Scholar '03-'04	How do students understand participation in a hybrid course?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> II Active and Collaborative Learning IV Enriching Educational Experiences
SoTL Scholar '03-'04	What is the relationship between learning strategies and the ability to demonstrate critical thinking in online courses that use online discussion forums?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I Level of Academic Challenge II Active and Collaborative Learning IV Enriching Educational Experiences

		Experiences
SoTL Scholar '02-'03	How do instructor feedback systems impact academic progress (large class)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ III Student-Faculty Interactions ▪ IV Enriching Educational Experiences

From this analysis, the SoTL work easily begins to be translated into a common language of learning and is reframed into a research-based framework already used in the institution's planned change process. NSSE (or other research-based frameworks) data and its broad benchmarks of student learning can be coupled with each SoTL project previously analyzed for its underlying links to NSSE. The connective tissue bridging the chasm between SoTL and broader campus change processes is forged outside of a debate about rigor and scholarship, replaced by discussion of what do we know about the institution, our students, and what we can do to improve? For example, during a discussion of retention and first year engagement, how difficult is it to summarize the SoTL work done on first year large classes, engagement through hybrid discussions, a study that examines the impact of faculty feedback, or findings on how students view participation or group work in large classes? The interest in the local institution's scores as well as SoTL data has been cultivated. It is up to the SoTL advocate to seize the moment in planned change when it is most *data-driven* and open to understanding the students and student learning within the institutional context in order for the institution to change and improve. The analysis of SoTL work for its larger themes of student learning is imperative in order for classroom inquiry to become linked to the broader questions about the institution that are asked during institutional change processes.

Implications for Practice

The proposed model for linking SoTL with broader institutional initiatives requires a carrier or envoy to make explicit the connections between classroom-based SoTL inquiry and institutional priorities. Someone has to be at the table or close by to make the not so obviously shared learning concerns evident. The common conduit for enabling this connection is through faculty and staff within faculty development or teaching centers that are keenly familiar with and maintain SoTL programs at the institutional level. Familiar with the institution's SoTL work, they can use the institution's research-based frameworks to link classroom inquiry to institutional initiatives with shared themes of student learning. For example, calls for SoTL scholar proposals at some institutions have been annually linked to service learning, general education, large classes, and first year experiences, making the connective tissue to institutional initiatives even stronger. In order to bridge the gap and foster a connective tissue, several implications for practice are proposed (see Table 4):

Table 4: Practices for Aligning SoTL with Institutional Initiatives through Research-based Frameworks

Know Your Institution:

1. Identify *recognized* institutional need for change.
2. Monitor institutional needs, priorities and initiatives.
3. Identify institutional research-based frameworks (i.e. NSSE)
4. Review the institutional research data, noting patterns, need for further information, institutional strengths and weaknesses related to student learning
5. Know the comparative national and cohort data regarding identified institutional priorities.
6. Identify institutional priorities and initiatives for their underlying links to student learning.
7. Volunteer for and accept involvement with campus initiatives.

Connective Tissue-Bridging the Gap

Know the SoTL Work:

1. Identify the student learning themes among the SoTL projects.
2. Analyze existing and SoTL project learning themes and findings for alignment with institutional priorities.
3. Identify the institutional research-based frameworks (i.e., NSSE)
5. Identify how SoTL project and learning themes are linked to institutional research-based frameworks (i.e., NSSE benchmarks).

Conclusion

Despite SoTL's development as a movement, most SoTL work remains institutionally marginalized at the level of classroom inquiry. Countering the marginalization from the institution that has plagued SoTL up until this point in its evolution requires a process that identifies a common intersection.

Although the common intersection is learning, making evident the common themes of learning embedded in both SoTL work and institutional initiatives requires a credible, evidence-based framework the speaks to both change processes and activities. NSSE, or other research-based frameworks, enable SoTL work to speak to the larger initiatives of the institution and make classroom-based data translatable to the language of institutional change. As the connective tissue between SoTL inquiry and institutional priorities is grown, SoTL will "advance practice beyond" and impact institutional decision making and planning, and the broader landscape of institutional initiatives that intersect with learning and teaching. No, this isn't all there is. There is more yet to be done. It is time for SoTL to mature to the next level of impact.

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