

## **Broadening the Horizons of New Instructors to Transform the Landscape of SoTL**

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### **Abstract:**

*As new instructors in higher education settings, graduate students might not receive enough exposure to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) in their graduate teacher development courses. This exposure is necessary for new instructors to avoid uncritical teaching and to become scholarly teachers who focus first and foremost on their students' learning. I offer some practical suggestions in this personal reflection to instructors of graduate teacher development courses with the intent of helping new instructors become more familiar with the SoTL. Only by using pedagogical practices to expose new instructors to the SoTL will we be able to broaden their horizons and transform the landscape of SoTL to become more influential for both teachers and learners.*

### **Key Words:**

Scholarship of teaching and learning, graduate teacher development, new instructors, pedagogical practices.

### **Introduction**

Two years ago, as a graduate psychology student, I underwent the course requirement to become an instructor of undergraduate psychology courses at my university. I learned a great deal in this course under the tutelage of a masterful teacher (who is, in fact, the best college teacher I know). The experiences I shared with my classmates—my fellow new instructors—contributed greatly to my learning and preparing to become the best instructor I could be. However, today, after having completed my “rookie” year of teaching, I realize that our initial exposure in that course to the SoTL was insufficient, which means that many of my fellow new instructors have been teaching without consulting the SoTL literature or engaging in the SoTL process to justify or improve their pedagogical practices.

This is something I tried wholeheartedly to avoid since I already had a “SoTL mindset” before becoming a teacher due to my experiences as a student on the

“receiving end” of practices that just did not meet my learning expectations and did not captivate my learning spirit. In fact, as an undergraduate student (and even today as a graduate student), I often found myself critiquing my teachers’ instructional strategies instead of embracing what they were trying to teach; this happened to be a more stimulating use of my mental faculties. Admittedly, it is unfair to expect all teaching to captivate and enlighten students’ minds, or to transform their actions, but the same thing can be said about teaching according to predetermined outcomes or the transfer of content or skills, especially at the college level. Because I did not want my students to endure poor educational experiences at my hands, like I did at the hands of many of my instructors, I sought to learn and cultivate the best pedagogical practices as I became a teacher.

Assuredly, many new instructors already have this mindset, so the first relevant question is: how can it be best cultivated? On the other hand, other new instructors may just want to “get the job done” or use the standard teaching practices they are familiar with because they assume these practices are the most effective since they are the most commonly used. This raises another important question: how can these students be encouraged toward considering the SoTL? My contention is that new instructors would be better equipped for their professional careers with early and adequate exposure to the SoTL, and that this exposure should begin right off the bat in their graduate teacher development courses. Moreover, to truly transform the SoTL, it seems reasonable to begin by teaching new generations of instructors new (and, more importantly, more effective) tricks (we can think of this as a kind of “primary prevention” against poor teaching).

This personal reflection, then, is directed towards those who are in the unique SoTL position of teaching and influencing new instructors of post-secondary level courses, namely, undergraduate courses. Seasoned instructors who have the role of preparing new instructors to teach undergraduate students are crucial to their students’ professional development, so it makes sense from a SoTL perspective for these teachers of teachers to consider ways to benefit their students as “learner-teachers” (and their students’ students as learners) by providing as helpful SoTL exposure as possible from the get-go.

It is important for these teachers to emphasize to new instructors what the SoTL entails or else they will likely just end up teaching as they have been taught (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 1997). In other words, instead of consulting the SoTL literature or engaging in the SoTL process, new instructors will draw upon the teaching practices and methods used by their past instructors, *uncritically*, which could have the unintended effect of propagating poor pedagogical practices. Consider a common example of this phenomenon at the post-secondary level—the use of PowerPoint presentations to accompany lecturing. Although none of my fellow new instructors read any research about the pedagogical effectiveness of PowerPoint presentations or how they can best be used to aid student-learning, almost all of them used PowerPoint presentations in their “mock” lectures and continue to use them in their respective courses today. This uncritical approach to teaching could be restricting to both instructors and their students as instructors could be propagating practices that are not necessarily supported by or synonymous with findings from the

SoTL, and they would not know any better if they did not evaluate their own teaching and their students' learning by engaging in the SoTL.

Instead of allowing this to happen, one goal of SoTL advocates should be to breed a SoTL culture early by actively intervening in graduate teacher development courses. If the instructors of these courses can teach new instructors how to use and contribute to the SoTL at the beginning of their careers, new instructors will become more successful and *critical* teachers. Teaching new instructors how to engage in the SoTL will hopefully also prepare them to continue improving their teaching and their students' learning throughout their careers, as they become scholarly teachers. What should teachers of graduate teacher development courses do for new instructors to orient them towards the SoTL? I will offer a few suggestions here.

First, they should consider using an instructional method similar to one used by the instructor of my graduate teacher development course. My instructor asked each of us to find a journal article or book chapter each week about some teaching-related material to read and then present a summary of to the class. These presentations throughout the semester gave us some familiarity with the SoTL, and they inspired me to further explore pedagogical issues and the SoTL literature. However, these presentations were not structured to ensure that all of the new instructors would have the same experience as me. Instructors of graduate teacher development courses should consider extending this method to explicitly address how new instructors should use the SoTL literature. They could do this by asking their students to find journal articles that support a particular teaching or assessment practice, for example, that they want to use in their classrooms. Instead of merely presenting summaries of these articles, instructors should require their students to present (or write) about how they would go about implementing the practice in their respective classrooms and they could even go as far as to allow their students to "test" practices with their fellow new instructors in the role of "test" students. Furthermore, they could have these new instructors evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a practice pertaining to how it would affect the learning of their future students. This would help new instructors become more familiar with the SoTL literature and how to use it to the benefit of their students.

Second, teachers should provide new instructors with direct access to SoTL resources. I will mention three considerations here of the kind of resources they should provide: 1. Teachers typically do not become teachers of teachers unless they are especially good at what they do, so they should be more transparent about their own SoTL work since they are a resource in themselves to new instructors. They should use their disciplinary experiences to teach new instructors about the processes of conceptualizing instructional strategies, implementing SoTL research methods, and disseminating pertinent findings. 2. There is a wide variety of SoTL resources available to the public through the Internet, including open access SoTL journals. Instructors of graduate teacher development courses should be active in locating and compiling relevant resources to refer to their students. For example, new instructors who are interested in a "how to" guide for conducting SoTL research might be benefited by an article such as O'Loughlin's (2006). 3. New instructors might need some help thinking critically about teaching practices they may have taken for granted, such as the aforementioned use of PowerPoint presentations to supplement lecturing. In these

cases, teachers should emphasize critical thinking about pedagogical practices. Continuing my example, it would be helpful to discuss the pedagogical drawbacks to using PowerPoint presentations (see Johnson, 2008 for a summary of both drawbacks and benefits) and to contrast PowerPoint presentations with alternative pedagogical approaches so that new instructors can make the most informed decisions when selecting their own teaching practices and styles.

Finally, a more practical activity would involve teaching new instructors how to become SoTL researchers themselves by completing a SoTL project of their own or in collaboration with other new instructors or faculty. This would entail actively teaching them about SoTL concepts and methods and the process of refining and researching pedagogical practices. For example, I wanted to use a specific form of collaborative assessment for the first class I was assigned to teach so I consulted the SoTL literature to learn about the benefits of collaborative assessment for students' learning. I discovered that although collaborative assessment was a highly recommended assessment practice there was no existing research about the collaborative assessment I had in mind. Therefore, I designed a study to assess its effectiveness for my students' learning, and will use my findings to determine whether the assessment is worth continuing to use; if it is, I will write up my findings to share with the SoTL community. In the meantime, the background for this project inspired me to write a paper about the differences between existing and alternative collaborative assessments, which I was able to present at an international conference on education (Zhang, 2012). Instructors of graduate teacher development courses should make a SoTL project—like the one I engaged in on my own—a requirement for new instructors while they are completing their teaching practicums, and they should mentor new instructors throughout the research process. This way, new instructors will have firsthand experience with completing a SoTL project, right off the bat, which will prepare them to conduct similar research in the future and to avoid becoming educators who do not use resources such as published research and teaching and learning centers to improve their students' learning.

In the spirit of the SoTL, I would submit that there also needs to be a SoTL attitude towards the pedagogical practices I have outlined in this essay. After all, Pescosolido et al. (2004) contend that the SoTL is the best vehicle for developing future faculty, which leads to my conclusion that only by using pedagogical practices to expose new instructors to the SoTL will we be able to broaden their horizons and ultimately transform the landscape of SoTL to become more influential for both teachers and learners.

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