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## Defining the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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# Defining the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

## **Abstract**

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has been variously defined over its history. We suggest that evolving identity definitions are part of SoTL's developmental process. Ascribing to Huber and Hutchings' (2005) 'big tent' philosophy, we note that useful definitions of SoTL should take into account the local context and focus on the outcome of improving learning and educational quality.

L'avancement des connaissances en enseignement et en apprentissage (ACEA) a été défini de diverses manières au fil de son histoire. Nous suggérons que les définitions correspondant à cette identité qui évolue font partie du processus de développement de l'ACEA. En acceptant la philosophie de la « grande tente » de Huber et Hutchings (2005), nous remarquons que les définitions utiles de l'ACEA devraient tenir compte du contexte local et se concentrer sur le résultat qui consiste à améliorer l'apprentissage et la qualité de l'éducation.

In attempting to grapple with their perspectives on their Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) topics, each of the SoTL Canada *Collaborative Writing Groups* struggled with definitional aspects of SoTL. Bringing different lenses (personal, institutional, disciplinary) to this question and drawing on a wide range of literature made it challenging for groups to arrive at a working definition. In the end we agreed, as co-facilitators of the process, to provide a working definition to frame the special issue. We note that our definition expresses Huber and Hutchings' (2005) 'big tent' philosophy.

Boyer (1990) initially coined the term *scholarship of teaching*, distinguishing amongst four scholarships: 1) *discovery*, or investigating – such as empirical research; 2) *integration*, or synthesizing – such as a literature review, especially one that connects across disciplines; 3) *application*, or engaging – such as applying one's field to academic service and other problems; and 4) *teaching*, or educating – such as happens through “not only transmitting knowledge, but transforming and extending it as well” (p. 24). Over time, *learning* has been added to Boyer's definition to emphasize the focus on students, and resulting in the now ubiquitous term *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*.

As befits an evolving field, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning's definitions have shifted over time. As SoTL grew into its adolescence, while a lens of focusing on learning continued, distinctions among good teaching, scholarly teaching, and the scholarship of teaching prevailed (e.g., Potter & Kustra 2011; Vajoczki et al., 2011). In addition, SoTL was increasingly positioned as including ways of making the findings public. More recently, additional foci have emerged – for example, Felten's (2013) widely cited “Principles of Good Practice in SoTL” includes involving students as partners in SoTL work. In each of these, SoTL brings a lens of inquiry to teaching and learning processes. SoTL “requires a kind of ‘going meta,’ in which faculty frame and systematically investigate questions related to student learning” (Hutchings & Shulman, 1999, p. 13).

Despite this focus on improving student learning, challenges seem to remain with outlining what SoTL comprises (and what it does not). Simmons et al. (2013), for example, note the difficulty new SoTL scholars encounter as they try to make sense of the field. As Simmons (2015) points out, “scholars of teaching and learning come from all disciplines and often bring their disciplinary lenses to studying these processes” (para. 1). Despite the fact that many foundational SoTL texts emphasized a ‘big tent’ and multidisciplinary vision (e.g., Huber & Hutchings, 2005; Huber & Morreale, 2002) the question of disciplinary approaches to SoTL has been especially fraught. Numerous scholars from the Humanities, for example, have critiqued implicit positioning of SoTL as a brand of Social Sciences research, urging for a broader conception that admits a wider range of questions, epistemologies, and methodologies (e.g., Chick, 2013; Potter & Wuetherick, 2015; Bloch-Schulman et al., 2016). With such considerations in mind, Felten (2013) argues simply that SoTL must be methodologically sound, rigorously deploying tools that are appropriate to the question at hand, without specifying particular traditions from which those methodologies might be drawn. SoTL scholars come from myriad backgrounds and institutional cultures, and bring these flavours into their SoTL work as well as their perspectives and interpretations of what that work comprises.

One of the key emphases from SoTL Canada's work on *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Canada: Institutional Impact* was that context is critical in terms of how we define the SoTL and that tight definitions that do not take the local institutional context into account may in fact impede SoTL impact and growth. Instead, a useful direction can be found in Hutchings, Huber, and Ciccone's (2011) words. SoTL is

best understood as an approach that marries scholarly inquiry to any of the intellectual tasks that comprise the work of teaching – designing a course, facilitating classroom activities, trying out new pedagogical ideas, advising, writing student learning outcomes, evaluating programs (Shulman, 1998). When activities like these are undertaken with serious questions about student learning in mind, one enters the territory of the scholarship of teaching and learning. (Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011, p. 7)

Definitions are about both the “setting of boundaries” and “a statement of the essential nature of something” (The Online Etymology Dictionary, 2016). Regardless of myriad perspectives, disciplines, and institutional contexts, the essence of “the overall intention of SoTL is thus to improve student learning and enhance educational quality” (Poole & Simmons, 2013, p. 118).

The articles in this issue reflect this broad intention, while also making clear the multiple ways in which it might be effectively realized. The approaches taken by the authors range from the generation of composite narratives and auto-ethnography, to document analysis, and the development of novel models and frameworks that draw on existing scholarly work. While to some extent one could argue that the methodological choices made by the authorial teams were constrained by the unique demands and tight timelines of the yearlong collaborative writing groups process, this diversity nonetheless reflects and further contributes to the growing sense of SoTL’s methodological pluralism.

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